

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, November 7, 1898, by Frank Tousey.

No. 320.

NEW YORK, JULY 20, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

AIR LINE WILL; THE YOUNG ENGINEER. OF THE NEW MEXICO EXPRESS. *By JAS. C. MERRITT.*



With whip and spur Katie kept her horse close to the cars until the tender was reached. Leaning far out, Air Line Will threw an arm about her waist, to lift her clear of the saddle.

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CHAPTER I.

THE TRAIN ROBBERS.

Our story opens on a beautiful October morning, when the rays of the rising New Mexico sun were glinting down through the valleys and mountain sides of that picturesque land, sifting like a golden shower through the luxuriant foliage of palm and pecan, and penetrating even to the dark hidden depths of impenetrable chaparral.

Wild indeed and desolate is this semi-tropical country, yet a veritable land of promise, for its rich gold mines, its fruits and farming lands find no peer anywhere upon the face of the globe.

Hitherto a trackless wilderness, certain enterprising adventurous Eastern capitalists had conceived the idea of opening up to travel and to civilization a large tract of country west of the Rio Pecos and north of the Aminos Hills.

James Vandermeer, a four times millionaire of New York city, had lent his influence and his fortune to the enterprise, and the result was the founding of the model and beautiful city of Santa Rosa right in the heart of the desert.

Two years saw a city of six thousand inhabitants spring up. It was all like a miracle.

The Santa Rosa gold mine was in working order, and paying its stockholders in the East thousands of dollars. A machine shop, factories, stores, and fine dwellings were constructed. From a mere trading-post Santa Rosa sprang into life as a flourishing embryo metropolis.

A line of railroad connected the little city with the outside world, the Santa Rosa Air Line road extending straight as an arrow to Lopez, making connections there with the Denver and Rio Grande.

The distance was about two hundred miles, and the stations were few and unimportant; yet the road maintained itself, and bade fair to yet pay a heavy dividend.

James Vandermeer was the president of the Air Line, and Henry Allman, a young man of promise, was the General Passenger Agent. There was much travel over the road, but of late several very peculiar and exciting difficulties had come up, which gave Mr. Vandermeer and Mr. Allman no end of trouble.

One great difficulty was the securing of efficient train hands. One train in particular, the nine o'clock express, had been in the hands of an inexperienced engineer, the result being a general wreck of the locomotive and six cars, at Deep Gap, a place not twelve miles distant from Santa Rosa.

But this was not all.

Three times the express had been held up by train robbers and twenty thousand dollars in gold dust and ore taken from the express car. Upon the present morning a large crowd was gathered at the depot in consequence of a startling rumor.

This was, in substance, that Black Waldo, the noted New Mexico bandit, had on foot a scheme to hold up the train between Santa Rosa and Lopez that very day. There was no substantial evidence to establish this as a positive fact, yet everybody seemed inclined to give the report credence.

Accordingly a large crowd had collected to see the train go out that morning, and the excitement ran quite high. President Vandermeer was inclined to discredit the report.

There was fifty thousand dollars in gold ore in the express car, with six armed men to guard it. Yet, just as it came time to start the train, Jake Phillips, the engineer, stepped down from the cab, and shrugging his shoulders, said:

"I had a written warning from Black Waldo to hold up the train at Deep Gap or be shot. I don't like to risk anything of the sort. I can't take the train down to-day. You'll have to get somebody else, Mr. Vandermeer."

The millionaire was dumfounded.

"Nonsense, Phillips!" he cried. "You have too much good sense, I know. Get onto your engine and go along. Time is up."

But Phillips shook his head doggedly.

"I am sorry, Mr. Vandermeer," he said decidedly. "I can't do it."

"What kind of a way is this to do?" stormed the millionaire. "By heavens, Phillips, you surely don't mean to break your contract?"

"I am justified," replied the engineer. "My life is at stake, and much as I would like to oblige you, I must refuse to go out with the train to-day."

"I gave you credit for more courage, Phillips. Why, I will go with you myself."

"That would be folly. As true as you live the train will be held up, and Black Waldo is not a man to be trifled with."

A murmur went through the crowd. It was a climax which held the deepest of interest and excitement for all. Black Waldo's name was well known, and there were many who did not blame Phillips for refusing to take the risk.

"Why, this is preposterous!" cried Mr. Vandermeer, forcibly. "What an idea that a scoundrel like Black Waldo should stop the running of trains upon the air line. We would be fools to stand in fear of such a fellow. Be a man, Jake."

"I am sorry," said the engineer, stubbornly, "but I cannot do it."

"I wouldn't, either, Jake," said a sympathetic voice in the crowd.

"Don't you go," said another.

Black Waldo is a bad one."

Mr. Vandermeer looked about him hopelessly.

"This train must go out to-day," he declared strenuously. "If I have to run the engine myself. Is there a man in this crowd who will dare to take this train down to Lopez?"

Not an answer came. All stood about in silence.

"Is it possible!" exclaimed President Vandermeer continuously. "I had fancied that in this crowd I should find one brave man. The train is well guarded, and the robbers would be sure to be whipped."

"You are wrong, Mr. Vandermeer," said a man in the throng. "The car may be well guarded, but that does not wholly protect the engineer. His position is an exposed one, and he would be almost sure to be killed by the train gang's bullets."

"Enough!" cried the railroad magnate. "Now, and for the last time, will any man volunteer to take this train down to Lopez? Five hundred dollars to the man who will accompany me in the engine cab."

The magnate stepped along to the cab and waited a moment for an answer. It came.

From the throng there stepped forth a well-made young man; indeed a boy in years, yet wonderfully built physically. His features were frank and handsome, and his manner manly as he cried:

"I will take the train down to Lopez, sir. I don't want the five hundred dollars for it, either. I should have spoken before, but for fear your own engineer might repent."

There the young volunteer stood before the railroad magnate, the eyes of all upon him. Everybody's face wore a look of surprise, and not a few were intensely amused.

"You!" exclaimed Mr. Vandermeer, involuntarily. "Why, you are too young, my boy."

The young man's face flushed.

"I am twenty years of age, sir," he said.

"Have you ever run a locomotive?"

"Oh, yes, sir. My uncle was an engineer all his life. When I was fifteen I ran a switch engine in the Baltimore and Ohio yards. I can give you reference, sir."

Mr. Vandermeer was more surprised than words can express.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Will Wright."

"What reference can you give?"

Will Wright drew from his pocket a letter, and handed it to the magnate. Mr. Vandermeer read it with amazement. Then he read:

"This is to certify that Will Wright, the young man bearing this name, is recommended, is a skilled and thoroughly efficient engineer, duly registered, and known to us as a sober, moral and upright gentleman. Baltimore and Ohio Railroad."

"Per ore" R. Garrett, Manager.

Mr. Vandermeer read this through, and handing it back to Will Wright, said:

"You are accepted. Get onto this engine with me."

Without a word Will Wright obeyed.

Mr. Vandermeer, with a brace of pistols in his hands, sat upon one side of the cab, while the young engineer took the other side. He threw off his coat, and with such skill as showed the master hand, opened the throttle and set the train in motion.

The crowd, which had suddenly become enthusiastic, gave a loud cheer as the express rolled out of the depot and soon was speeding away like the wind across the level plains.

The fireman was a Mexican, by name Juan Perez. By Will's able direction he soon had the furnace at a roaring heat, and all steam on. With a great deal of satisfaction Mr. Vandermeer watched the operation of the young engineer, and recognized the fact that he was more skillful than Jake Phillips, his predecessor.

Despite his cool, brave demeanor, the railroad magnate was nevertheless much worried. He knew that the train might be wrecked by Black Waldo before reaching Lopez, in which event serious loss of life might follow.

The treasure car had been especially fitted for the contingency, with barred doors and loopholes through which the six men inside might fire at a foe. It would be no easy matter to take the treasure car.

But the engineer's position was one of extreme peril. Will Wright, however, did not seem to mind this fact, being cool and self-possessed, though once he leaned over and spoke to Mr. Vandermeer.

"I think, sir, that you need not remain in the cab. I do not fear the train robbers, and you would be safer in the treasure car."

"No," said Mr. Vandermeer decidedly. "I shall remain with you in the cab."

On sped the express, literally flying over the rails.

Upon the broad open plain they had nothing to fear. The track was all clear, and they made fast time. But presently there came into view a high range of hills.

The train left the prairie and shot into a deep pass. This was Deep Gap, the spot feared as the stamping region of Black Waldo the bandit chief.

Mr. Vandermeer had changed his position, and held his pistols in readiness. His face was a trifle paler, but he evinced no fear.

As for Will Wright, the young engineer, he was as cool as an icicle, and seemed altogether heedless of danger. Down through the pass flew the train, and Will remained at the cab window, keeping the ever watchful gaze down the track.

Not a word was spoken now by anybody in the cab. It seemed a time of suspense which was suddenly broken. There came a snapping and rending of wood just by Will's head. Splinters were separated from the frame of the cab window by a bullet, the report not having been heard. The young engineer, without evincing trepidation and scarcely surprise, took off his hat, showing a bullet hole through the rim.

"He is truly a young fellow of nerve," thought the railroad magnate at that moment.

CHAPTER II

THE BATTLE IN THE PASS

"That was evidently meant for me," said the young engineer coolly. "But that was a bad shot. However, I have believed that the bullet is not yet past that will end my life."

"I hope not," cried the railroad president. "That was a narrow escape, though."

In spite of his coolness, though, Vandermeer could see that the young engineer was not reckless, and constantly upon the alert. His ready eye and trained nerve was evidence that he had faced danger many times before, as, indeed, the man who adopts the hazardous life of engineer is called upon to do.

The bullet which had so nearly proved fatal to the young engineer was ample warning of the nearness of a crisis. It came a few moments later.

It was now necessary to slacken the speed of the train for a rather sharp curve. Thus far they had run along at a sixty mile clip, but now the train was slowed down to easily thirty miles an hour.

It was a moment of anxiety, for Mr. Vandermeer knew that the obstruction would be almost sure to be placed here.

This proved to be the truth. The curve had not been half rounded when Will's ready eye caught sight of a big barricade of rocks and beams across the track.

Also the sides of the gap were lined with armed and masked men.

"We are in for it!" cried President Vandermeer. "Put down the lever, my boy."

There was little need of this injunction. Will Wright's keen eye and ready right arm were quick to see and act. Back went the lever, out flew the whistle valve, and sharp notes of distress went shrieking up the gorge.

The air-brakes were almost instantly applied, and the train came to a stop before reaching the barricade. This avoided a collision and derailment, but it placed the train exactly in the midst of the gang of robbers.

Quicker than a flash the young engineer had whistled "brakes off," and reversed the lever, with the idea of running the train back and out of the trap.

The scheme would have worked well but for a provision made by the robbers, and this was the instant tearing up of rails as soon as the train had passed at a point further up the track.

The train ran back as far as this amid a fusillade of bullets, but the rear car was derailed, and then the whole train came to a stop, held up as it were in a most skilful manner.

The scene which followed was an exciting one. The outlaws rushed down upon the train, and had the cab not been occupied by the most determined and brave men the engineer and fireman would have been killed.

The fireman had disappeared. Where he had gone Will Wright had no means of knowing.

Immediately upon the stopping of the train Mr. Vandermeer had opened fire upon the robbers.

He had two large caliber pistols capable of seven shots each, and he made every shot tell. One of the pistols he gave to Will Wright, who showed at once his ability to use it.

While neither the brave president of the road nor the young engineer took special pains to shield themselves from the bullets of the bandits, strange to say they were not hit. In return they fired many telling shots—in fact, keeping up such a fusillade that the enemy were held in check.

Those in the treasure car had now began to use their rifles, and with most deadly effect. But the train robbers had swarmed upon the platform, and were around the car as thick as flies.

A battle of the most desultory sort ensued.

The car was literally splintered and riddled with the volleys of rifle balls. The cab of the locomotive was also badly used up, the bullets taking away the window sashes and glass. But by the greatest of good fortune neither defender was hurt.

Mr. Vandermeer, however, had three hot holes in his coat,

and a bullet had crashed into the steam gauge of the locomotive.

But so active were the defenders of the engine, and so brave that the bandits were driven back with a heavy loss. They yet swarmed upon the treasure car, however, and Mr. Vandermeer turning to Will, asked:

"Would you try to help them?"

Nothing was plainly to be gained by longer defense of the engine. Except it and the treasure car the whole train was in the possession of Black Waldo's gang.

The passengers had been robbed, and were many of them bound and gagged in the cars.

Foremost in the attacking gang was a broad shouldered ruffian, with full black beard and long hair falling over his shoulders. This was Black Waldo himself.

Twice Vandermeer had fired at him without hitting him, however. He seemed to bear a charmed life. At this moment Will saw the legs of the Mexican fireman projecting from beneath the coal screen in the tender, which clearly explained his disappearance.

Kicking the screen aside, the young engineer compelled the frightened stoker to get upon his feet.

"Have you got a revolver?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied Perez.

"Then make use of it."

The Mexican grinned in a sickly way, and drew a glittering silver-mounted weapon from his pocket, showing that, like all his countrymen, he was well armed. He fired several shots, though it could not be seen that they had any effect.

Vandermeer had bethought himself of a daring coup-de-main.

He saw at a glance that thus far the defenders of the train had the best of the situation. The bandits were half a hundred in number, yet the six or eight men on the train held them at bay.

"By Jove, we will whip them yet," cried the railroad magnate excitedly, and it was at this point that he had asked the question:

"Would you try to help them?"

"There is but one way," said Will.

"What?"

The young engineer pointed down the track to the barricade now a quarter of a mile below, for the train had run back that distance ere being derailed.

The barricade was wholly unguarded. Every one of the train robbers were about the treasure car. The idea which had flashed almost at the same moment though the minds of both Will Wright and Mr. Vandermeer was to run quickly down to the barricade and endeavor to remove it by physical force. This could be done if unmolested.

Perez and the young engineer could work upon it, while Mr. Vandermeer would attempt the keeping of the robbers at bay should they leave the attack on the treasure car and come down to attack the engine. But in order to accomplish this daring and brilliant move it would be necessary to uncouple the engine from the train.

How this could be safely accomplished was a question. To step outside the cab in any direction would be to become almost instantly riddled by bullets.

Will and Mr. Vandermeer exchanged glances. The young engineer first hit upon the correct plan.

He took the loaded pistol between his teeth, and stepped to the cab door.

"Keep them back if you can," he said, and the next instant he disappeared in the attempt at accomplishment of the most daring plan that human mind could conceive.

When Will Wright swung himself out of the cab it was to expose himself to a score of shots. But his transit from the

cab to the ground and thence beneath the tender was so quick that no one of the villains had time to draw a bead on him.

Once under the tender the wheels protected him, and, moreover, Mr. Vandermeer's unerring aim kept the enemy back.

Over the cedar sleepers and sand the young engineer wormed his way between the rails, until the ear of the tender was reached. To reach up and undo the couplings was but the work of a moment, and, luckily, the move was unperceived by the train robbers.

To regain the cab was now the question, but Will had no idea of again exposing himself to the bullets of his foes. He merely crept upon the wooden brake beam and shouted to Mr. Vandermeer:

"Let her go as fast as you want to."

The railroad magnate sprang to the throttle valve and glided away from the train. A wild howl went up from the astonished train robbers, but this was all the good it did them.

Down to the barricade the engine ran quickly, and then Will crept out from his dangerous and unpleasant quarters. A great point had been gained.

Strangely enough the robbers did not attempt pursuit. They evidently were too intent upon breaking into the treasure car.

So all three men were able to work upon the barricade. Stone after stone and heavy beams were lifted with herculean strength from the rails.

Every instant was precious, for it was not certain how long the six men in the car would hold out. But in a very short space of time, by working rapidly they had the track before them entirely clear. So elated did they feel that they could not repress a cheer.

Unfortunately this attracted the attention of the train robbers, part of whom at once started for the scene. But, springing aboard the engine, they set the wheels in motion and quickly glided back to the train.

On the way shots were exchanged in lively fashion, and Mr. Vandermeer was slightly wounded in the hand. But the train was reached, and the tender bunted a coupling with the treasure car, Will having left the pins in the right position.

The firing was now rapid and furious as the engine began to draw upon the train. There was a momentary strain, then the couplings of the derailed car in the rear parted, and the train was free.

Beneath the magic touch of Will Wright upon the throttle valve the engine fairly leaped forward. A panic ensued among the train robbers. Men were crushed beneath the wheels, and were shot down as they vainly endeavored to board the locomotive.

The young engineer set the whistle at work, and in the twinkling of an eye the train had flashed past the recent barricade through the gantlet of Winchester rifles and derringers in the hands of the train robbers, leaving Black Waldo and his crew behind in mortification, defeat, and rage.

Down through Deep Gap ran the train, and out into the open country again. It looked like a signal victory for the railroad people, and was a costly lesson to the bandits. Fully twenty of their number lay dead in the Gap, while it was learned upon a visit to the treasure car that but two of the six men therein stationed had been killed.

Those of the bandit crew who had been on the train when it started, realizing defeat and fearing capture, had leaped off. The battle in the pass was ended.

Arrived up to the next station, Ojo Parto Will Wright ran the train, and here the wounded and dead were cared for. The entire town turned out on moonlight, greatly excited over the defeat of Black Waldo's band.

President Vandermeer was perhaps the most elated of any, and would persist in saying:

"I tell you it was all due to the bravery and sharp work of our young air line engineer. He is a hero, I can tell you that."

CHAPTER III.

THE DEED OF AN ENEMY.

Will Wright was somewhat abashed with such a shower of praise, and modestly murmured a protest, to which President Vandermeer would not listen, however.

"I understand it all," he said. "Words or explanations are quite unnecessary. You will remain in charge of this train on a liberal salary, and that five hundred dollar check awaits you in the company's office at Santa Rosa. By the way, I shall take the liberty to christen you. From this time on you are Air Line Will, the boy hero of Deep Gap, who saved fifty thousand dollars from falling into the hands of the train robbers. Oh, you shall not go unrewarded. I will prove to you that this corporation, at least, is not ungenerous."

"Really, you do me too much credit, Mr. Vandermeer," protested Will.

"Not a word," commanded the big-hearted magnate. And from that hour far and wide through the western country spread the name and fame of Air Line Will. Even Black Waldo himself admitted that the sole reason for his defeat was the presence of a brave man at the throttle valve of the locomotive.

A construction car, with one hundred armed vigilants, was sent up from Ojo Parto, and the track was soon in readiness for the return of the express from Lopez. Nothing was seen of the train robbers, but a deep grave was found where they had buried their dead.

At a late hour that night the express sped on its return through Deep Gap, and reached safely its destination, the terminus of the line at Santa Rosa.

The ovation in other towns over the great victory was nothing compared to the demonstration made by the citizens of Santa Rosa. Fully a thousand of them waited upon President Vandermeer and Air Line Will with a vote of thanks from the entire population of Santa Rosa.

Had Will Wright been a young man at all given to bigotry all this honor must have overwhelmed him. But he took everything gracefully and modestly, which only increased his popularity. At one leap Air Line Will had mounted into fame.

As he had been looking for a position of the kind, he readily accepted Mr. Vandermeer's generous offer, and took charge of the express from that hour.

For a week Air Line Will took the express back and forth between Santa Rosa and Lopez, and without a single mishap. Nothing was seen or heard of Black Waldo.

Every day except Sunday the train made its run. Saturday night President Vandermeer said to Will, much to his surprise:

"Call at my house to-morrow at three, I want to talk with you."

Will bowed in acquiescence, and did not see fit to ask what the subject might be which he wished to discuss. At the appointed hour the next day he presented himself at the elegant residence of the millionaire.

Will Wright in fine clothes was hardly the foot-begrimed young engineer of the express. He was as handsome and noble-looking as one might imagine, and his dress was as noble and becoming as that of a city swell.

When Will entered the beautiful garden attached to the Vandermeer residence he met face to face a very beautiful, slender young girl, to whom he lifted his hat politely.

It was Miss Katie Vandermeer, the railroad magnate's daughter.

"Indeed, Mr. Wright," she said, with a sweet smile, "what means this honor? You deign then to call upon your friends after all, though I presume it is difficult for you to forsake for even a moment your favorite locomotive. I am glad to welcome you."

Will had met Katie Vandermeer once before at the office. Quite a pleasant acquaintance was formed at once.

"To be acknowledged a friend of yours, Miss Katie," said the young engineer, gallantly, "is an honor which one cannot hold lightly."

The young girl blushed.

"I should believe you sincere in the compliment," she said, "if I thought your visit was intended for me and not for my father."

Will's heart fluttered like a captive bird.

"Really, Miss Katie," he began, and then stopped short. There was good reason for this.

From behind some shrubbery in another path a young man, attired as a swell, and leisurely puffing a cheroot, stepped languidly forth. He stood facing the young engineer with a contemptuous unfused smile upon his face.

"Chauncey Hill!" exclaimed Will, with a sudden darkening of his features, "you here!"

Chauncey Hill, a swell in every respect, laughed quietly.

"Oh, yes, I'm here, Will Wright," he said, coolly. "You see, like an evil spirit I am always hovering about your path. But really this meeting was unexpected, and no doubt unwelcome to you."

Then turning to Katie, he said rather sharply:

"I mistrust that you are not over well acquainted with this young man and his origin. You ought never to notice him again, for he is too vile for your sweet consideration."

Will Wright's face turned crimson red, then black and pale by turns. He stood quivering like an aspen with clenched fists. He did not speak at once. But Katie drew herself up in wonderment.

"What is this?" she asked, rather stiffly. "I do not understand it. What is wrong with this young man, Chauncey? My father esteems him highly."

"Your father is deceived."

"What do you mean?"

"Take my advice; have nothing to do with him."

"I cannot take any advice without an explanation. You, sir, at least—to Will—"can speak a word in defense. What does this mean?"

"Yes, I can speak a word in defense," said Will, in a voice in which indignation, pain, and resentment were blended. "This is an injustice which Mr. Hill sees fit to do me at every turn. In other communities than this he has poisoned the minds of people against me, and he will now deprive me of your friendship in the same mean way."

Katie stood for a moment in silence, and then said impulsively:

"He cannot take that from you without strong cause."

Almost a sob escaped the lips of the young engineer.

"It is true," he went on, "that I am but a poor engineer, and poverty is the curse most bitter which oppresses me now. But it is no disgrace to be poor, as any fair-minded person will admit."

"Certainly, it is not."

"Humph!" grunted Chauncey Hill. "What do you call it when that poverty is the outcome of crime?"

"Crime!" exclaimed Will in a deep constrained voice, while

his frame trembled with suppressed anger. But he controlled himself.

"Pardon me, Miss Katie," he said. "We will discuss the subject no further, if you please. I have come in obedience to your father's call."

Katie bowed and flashed a reproving glance at Hill. The young engineer would have moved on, but Hill, who seemed the personification of malice, called out derisively:

"Why don't you make a clean breast of it, Will Wright? You are trying to hold your head up among decent people, are you? Why don't you admit to them that your own father is a forger—a fugitive from justice—a hunted man in a foreign land. Nice reputation you have. Ha, ha, ha!"

The derisive laugh, the taunt, maddened Air Line Will. He sprang forward, and would have resented the insult forcibly, but that at that moment Mr. Vandermeer himself, who had overheard all, made his appearance.

"Stop where you are, Wright," he said, commandingly. "For shame, Hill, that you should so cruelly twit one of a disgrace for which he may be in nowise to blame."

"Oh, I don't care about it," said Hill, languidly. "Only we don't go in the same set, that is all."

"For that matter," said Mr. Vandermeer, sternly, "I think you need fear no contamination of evil sort from Wright, my dear friend Hill. I know him to be a straightforward young man. But you shall speak for yourself, Wright. Is there truth in the statement that your father is a fugitive from justice?"

Will bowed his head, while a shudder as of mortal pain went over him.

"It is," he replied, briefly.

"Was he guilty of forgery?"

"No," was the decisive reply. "That was the charge against him, but he was an innocent man. Listen, and I will tell you the story. Years ago his father and mine were partners in a law office in New York city. They were reputed wealthy, and I was as well brought up as Chauncey Hill was, though he seeks now to crush me. There came a financial crash, the firm was embarrassed, and certain forged checks turned up. My father never got the money, but the evidence was heaped upon him, an innocent man, and he was convicted, sent to prison, but escaped, and is now in a foreign land. I will leave to your own good sense this suggestion: Chauncey Hill's father escaped conviction and retired with a large fortune. Who got the money? Do you see the point? Oh, that was an injustice which I have made a sacred vow to wipe out. Now you know all. If I am disgraced in your sight then I will go out from it forever. You shall say the word!"

There was a sadness in the young engineer's eyes, which told of his suffering of mind. Chauncey Hill had not heard this story, for he had walked disdainfully away. There was a moment of silence, then Mr. Vandermeer took Will's hand in his in a mighty clasp, saying with depth of feeling:

"Hill is wrong. You are in no wise responsible for your father's transgressions, even if he was guilty. Do not fear that you will lose our good opinion, Will, not until we have seen you perform a disgraceful act yourself."

"Thank you," said Will, gratefully, and his heart leaped with the reassuring glance bestowed on him by Katie. "But you requested me to call, Mr. Vandermeer?"

"It was to ask you about this very matter," said the millionaire. "Hill mentioned it to me yesterday. It is all settled."

Air Line Will, the young engineer, left the millionaire's home a short while later, in a more happy frame of mind. It did not, somehow, seem as if Chauncey Hill had gained much by his superlative meanness.

From that moment everywhere he went the beautiful face of Katie Vandermeer followed him, even mingling with his

dreams. He longed to render her a favor in return for her kindly interest and sympathy, and the opportunity came.

Far out upon the Ojo Parto trail Mr. Vandermeer had a large ranch. Katie was a daring horsewoman, and one day conceived the idea of riding out to the ranch—a distance of twenty miles.

Without considering the risk of such a thing, she started quite alone. Her horse was a high mettled animal, and she rode on rapidly until well out upon the prairie.

Suddenly, upon mounting a rise in the prairie, she was confronted by a fearful sight. A whole war party of Apache Indians were riding directly toward her.

One glance was enough.

With a quick, sharp cry she turned her horse and galloped away on the back trail. The savages gave instant pursuit with wild yells.

It was a race for life, and Katie rode bravely. Away over the prairie went the mad race.

But the Apaches' horses were fresh, and were outfooting her thoroughbred. Katie saw that she was cut off from home, and turned her horse's head to the southward.

At this moment the railroad track came in view, and—could she believe her senses?—a train was in sight. It was the Lopez express, with Air Line Will at the throttle-valve.

Gazing out over the prairie Will saw the race. He recognized Katie and saw her peril. His blood bounded madly through his tingling veins. He saw that she was riding down toward the railroad track, and waving one arm to attract his attention. He pulled the whistle valve and sent forth a thrilling answer.

Then he slowed the train. Not too slow, for he knew the danger if the Apache warriors were enabled to come aboard. Running at a twenty mile clip, Will swung himself out of the cab, and signaled the flying maiden, who immediately urged her horse toward him.

She reached the embankment a few moments before the train, but at the twenty mile pace it was easy to keep up with the locomotive, which came along now. With whip and spur Katie kept her horse close to the cars until the tender was reached. Leaning far out, Air Line Will threw an arm about her waist to lift her clear of the saddle, but at that moment the foremost savage, who was hardly fifty yards behind, threw a lasso which seemed likely to settle down about the young engineer's shoulders.

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE MEETING.

The train was rushing on madly, but the swift lariat of the Apache Indian traveled faster, and not until the coil began to settle down over his shoulders did Will Wright realize his position.

But to realize it was not enough. He was powerless to act with the light form of Katie in his arms and hanging from the cab as he was.

Only the quick perception and ready action of Katie Vandermeer saved both of them, for to have been hurled from the engine at that moment would have meant certain death.

The young girl had seen the lasso coming, and with a little cry of horror saw it settle about Will's shoulders. With an incredibly swift movement of her hand she grasped the coil and jerked it aside. It caught Will's cap in the noose and it was whisked from his head. But they were saved. A more narrow escape could scarcely be imagined.

The lasso fell harmlessly, and the Indian foe was left be-

hind. All this had occurred in a very brief space of time. Will, recovering himself, after depositing Katie in the cab, opened the throttle wide and let the train run at full speed.

In a few minutes the locality and the redskin foe was lost to sight.

Katie Vandermeer had been saved in a most daring and incredible manner.

It could be fairly said that as much credit was due Katie for her wonderful nerve and horsemanship as belonged to Air Line Will for his bravery. Too much could not be said of the courage of both.

And while Air Line Will was working the big locomotive up to a tremendous speed, Katie sat upon the rocking cab seat watching his handsome face and figure with the grateful consciousness that he was her brave deliverer. It caused her a strange thrill, she scarcely knew why.

When the scene of danger was miles past and a clear track lay ahead, Will left his seat temporarily to the Mexican stoker, and, coming over, sat down beside the young girl.

Her face was still white, and her beautiful eyes dilated, while her bosom yet rose and fell with the excitement of the affair.

"I am so glad that lasso did not catch us," said Will. "Only think what a narrow escape."

"Indeed it was," she replied, with a surge of rich color mantling her cheeks. "I owe you a great debt, Mr. Wright."

"You owe me nothing," protested the young engineer. "It afforded me more of pleasure than you can know to have been able to render you that service."

"By this remark I am to understand that you really take pleasure in rendering me a service?" she asked, archly.

"I do," replied Will, earnestly, and with a wild leap of his heart.

"Then I may venture to ask a favor of you?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Count me among your best friends, and do not for an instant believe that I credit a single prejudicial statement uttered against you by Chauncey Hill. I consider that he acted the part of a very mean fellow."

Will was too much astonished for a moment to speak.

"Indeed," he said finally. "This has distressed you more than it has me. As for Mr. Hill's statements, regarding my father, they are partly correct, but——"

"Wait," she interposed gently. "What I mean to convey is, that in spite of the facts of your father's disgrace, it has not nor never can in the least alter my good opinion of you."

"I—I thank you," stammered the young engineer. "I am glad to know this, Miss Katie. Yet, upon second thought, I should have known that you were not the sort of person to allow such a knowledge to interfere with your personal estimation of myself. I am not justly responsible for my father's misdeeds."

"Certainly you are not," she continued warmly. "Both father and I think well of you, Will. When he knows how nobly you have saved my life, words will not express his gratitude."

"Indeed, I beg that you will think no more of it," said Will, blushing deeply. "But—but then," with a sudden brightening of his countenance, "if you really wish to make a return of the favor——"

"I do," she said, eagerly.

"It may be too much to ask."

"It cannot be too much."

Air Line Will's strong young frame trembled visibly, and his face was a trifle white as he ventured to go on.

"But I have no right to propose such a thing. I am only a poor engineer, and——"

"Stop!"

"I want you to understand," she said, firmly, "that the fact of your being an engineer does not lower you in my estimation, not in the least. I consider that any man, no matter how humble his calling, may be a gentleman, and you must not think for a moment that I do not regard you as in every way my equal, though my father is your employer."

Will Wright saw her meaning, clearly understood the breadth and scope of a mind which he realized was not of the ordinary sort. It was wonderful how that realization elevated him and put him at once at ease in her society.

"I am beginning to realize that you are truly my friend," he said nobly. "I share with you such a truthful sentiment. No matter what one's calling, he can be a gentleman if he chooses. I will then dare to ask of you a favor which I feared you would refuse."

"Name it."

"To-morrow night the new round house is to be opened with a supper and dance by the railroad employees. May I dare to ask that you will reserve for me the proud honor of the first dance of the evening?"

Kate's eyes opened wide, and a rippling laugh escaped her lips.

"I am presuming," rejoined the young engineer, quickly, "that you will condescend to attend the dance."

"Why, of course I shall," she cried with carelessness, "you silly fellow. You shall see that I am not ashamed to dance at the round house opening, but you surprise me. Is that all that you really wish to ask of me, that one poor little dance? Really, I shall feel slighted."

Will's heart gave a great leap. He could scarcely believe his senses.

"Are you jesting?" he asked eagerly, "or do you really mean that?"

"I mean every word of it," she said solemnly. "I shall feel much injured if you only claim one dance with me."

"I would claim them all if I dared," exploded the young engineer.

"Why not see me to the dance and home again?" she cried roughly. "Dear me! I believe you are too bashful for anything."

This brought Will down completely; with a great gulp he managed to articulate:

"I—that is—really—the honor——"

"That is enough; I will go."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"Do you really mean to say that you do not consider it demeaning yourself to go to the round house dance with me?"

"I shall be proud to go with you."

"I would die for you," said Air Line Will, in a choking voice, as he took her hand and gave it a gentle pressure. "Oh, Great God! what is that?"

A sharp cry had escaped the lips of the Mexican fireman at that moment, and it had also brought Will to his feet. An instant glance ahead revealed to him an awful blood-curdling sight.

They had just rounded a curve, and dead ahead, not many hundred yards, lay the prostrate figure of a man bound securely across the rails, so that at the right moment the locomotive must have cut off his head and feet. Only Air Line Will's ready hand and quick nerve averted a horrible tragedy then.

Who the man was or how he had come in such a position he had no means of knowing at that moment. His only thought was that a human life was in the balance and all depended on him.

In such an emergency Will's nerves were admirable. He kept once lost command of himself.

The train was going at full speed, but Will reversed the lever and pulled the whistle valve.

"Down brakes!"

The signal went shrieking out upon the air, and the next moment the jolting motion succeeded, which was evidence that the full pressure of the air brakes was on.

The headway of the train was instantly checked and the wheels ceased to revolve. Momentum slid the heavy cars forward some distance, however, but luckily a dead stop was reached with ten feet to spare.

The white, agonized face of the bound man was turned toward the engine. Air Line Will was the first to reach him.

The young engineer did not pause to ask questions, but with the utmost possible despatch proceeded to cut the rope which bound him.

It required but a moment's time to do this, and the rescued man was upon his feet seemingly none the worse for his experience, though weak and trembling from the effects of the awful fright.

The young engineer saw that he was a man about fifty years of age, with a mold of features which in youth had been handsome. His dress was shabby, and his garments torn and soiled, his general appearance being indicative of a hard fight.

One full, fair glance at his face was enough to enact a curious effect upon Air Line Will. His eyes flashed, a great cry escaped his lips, and he grasped the hands of the man whom he had just rescued.

"You here?" he cried in a strange voice and great excitement. "Great God! what does this mean? What are you here for?"

The other seemed equally as deeply affected as Air Line Will was, and in a husky voice replied:

"Yes, and I am here for a purpose. Hush! do not betray me. If you do I am lost. Do not betray your recognition."

With an effort the young engineer composed himself. By this time the report of the true state of affairs had spread through the train, and the passengers were all flocking to the spot. Will had only time to ask, in an agitated undertone:

"But how came you in this perilous position? Who tied you to the track?"

"That was a result of my indiscretion," was the reply. "In journeying through the hills near here on horseback I fell in with a Mexican. I foolishly made friends with him, and he led me into an ambush, where with five confederates he robbed me, and then tied me to the track to meet death."

"Fortunately you were not to die. It was a close call, though."

"Yes."

"Where were you going?"

"To Santa Rosa."

"To see me?"

"Not in particular. But I cannot tell you here. I shall return on this train to Santa Rosa, where I shall see you and tell you all. I cannot do it here."

By this time the passengers had come up, and listened to the rescued man's story with deepest interest. Great praise was heaped upon the young engineer for his prompt work in stopping the train, and then the signal was given to go ahead once more.

Will leaped upon the engine and opened the throttle. But Katie saw that he was weak, and pale and trembling. In alarm she sprang to his side and asked:

"What is the matter, Will? Are you sick? Tell me quickly!"

"N-no," replied the young engineer, wiping the perspiration which stood in cold beads upon his brow. "It was quite a

shock, for in another moment that man would have been a corpse. Oh, God! it is awful! Fate works out strange ends!"

Kate could not exactly understand this last remark, and suffered the young engineer to conduct her back to her seat. Will seemed to recover, and once more crowding steam upon the locomotive, sent her on the latter part of her journey.

Lopez was reached on time. One hour only elapsed before the return trip was in order. Air Line Will never left his engine, and Katie persisted in staying with him.

"I am going to ride back to Santa Rosa with you," she declared. "It is great fun to ride on a locomotive."

Will could not and would not refuse, so when the express started upon its homeward way Katie Vandermeer yet occupied a seat in the cab. For some strange reason Will was not very sociable on the return journey, and his mind seemed weighed down with some heavy subject, just what it was astute Miss Katie was at her wits' ends to rightly guess.

When, finally, after nightfall, the express dashed into Santa Rosa, and home once more, Will helped Katie down from the cab in the depot, she turned to him, and with much sincerity said:

"What is on your mind I do not know, but if it is trouble, and you want a friend, or you want help of any kind, please call on me first of all."

"Thank you kindly," said Will, in a choking voice. "I will not forget your kind offer. Good-by."

She flitted away through the depot to where a carriage awaited her. Will Wright turned away with a deep sigh, and after seeing his engine safely housed, left for his lodgings.

It was a dark night, and the streets through which he passed were dimly lighted. He suddenly became seized with a strange conviction, and this was that he was being followed, by whom he knew not, but in all likelihood some person who meant him harm.

"Deuced queer," he muttered, suddenly coming to a halt. "I'll find out who it is or my name is not Will Wright."

CHAPTER V.

THE INTERVIEW.

Several times the young engineer had caught a glimpse of a shadowy form just in his rear, but it was impossible to identify his pursuer. He determined to, if possible, find this out.

So, awaiting a favorable opportunity, he had come to a halt with the words which closed the previous chapter.

The unknown follower, whoever he might be, had not looked for this sudden move, for he walked almost down upon Will. The young engineer saw that he was tall, and that his face was muffled.

"Who are you and what are you dogging my footsteps for?" cried Air Line Will, sharply, and then made a dive for the unknown. But he was not quite quick enough. The tall individual darted away in the darkness, and though Will pursued hotly, he could not overtake him.

At length, discomfited and panting with exertion, the young engineer reached his lodgings and entered. But as he tumbled into bed to enjoy a much-needed rest he declared with sudden conviction:

"Upon my word! I believe that was no other than Chauncey Hill. Yet what does it mean. Why should he be dogging me about? It is all very queer, and I purpose to know the meaning of it before long."

A few moments later he was sleeping soundly. The next morning he was awake at an early hour, and went out with

the express upon his regular run. It was nightfall when he returned and went once more to his lodgings.

It was the night of the dance at the round-house, and also the time set for his appointment with the man whom he had rescued from the perilous position on the railroad track.

Will had both affairs upon his mind and did not purpose to lose either if possible. He dressed himself with all care, and was a veritable young Adonis when he finally emerged upon the street in evening dress.

It was now barely seven o'clock, and he knew that it would be in good season to call for Katie Vandermeer to accompany him at nine o'clock. Two hours were his to spare and he determined to make good use of them.

The place of appointment which had been conveyed to Will in a whisper by the man whom he had rescued so opportunely from the railroad track, was at the end of a small bridge which spanned a torrent in the outskirts of the town.

No houses were near, and it was an unfrequented locality, so that there was little fear of the meeting being observed. No doubt the reader will wonder that one of Air Line Will's open character should seek a private interview of this sort with anyone, but this matter will be fully explained shortly.

Will struck out for the Red Bridge, and soon had left the lighted streets of the town behind him.

But as he strode on he became impressed with a sudden strange and startling conviction. It was just such a sensation as he had experienced the night before, and this was that he was being followed.

He tried in vain to ascertain this for a positive fact, and also, who his pursuer was. He could not even get a glimpse of him. Yet he would have taken his oath that his footsteps were dogged.

Finally he approached the place of appointment, and having as yet seen no sign of his follower he threw off in a measure the fear which was upon him, and tried to ascribe it to an effect of the imagination.

The Red Bridge was now in view, and Will suddenly saw a tall form in his path. He halted and made a signal with his arm.

"Is it you?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes," was the reply, and then they drew nearer. There was just enough of light for Will to identify the other's features, when casting aside all reserve, he sprang forward and embraced him, crying joyfully:

"My father! Oh, this is a great joy."

"My dear son."

We will not dwell upon the first tenderness of that meeting. Separated as they had been for years, it was not strange that both, strong of heart though they were, gave way to tears.

Though Will had not seen his father before since his exile, he had received letters from him regularly, and it had been the young engineer's chief dream of happiness to have his father once more with him on American soil, cleared of disgrace and that awful sorrow.

It may now be understood why Mr. Wright was so anxious that his identity be not betrayed when rescued from the railroad track by his own son. A fugitive from the law, to have been betrayed there would have meant the defeat of all his plans.

The reason why the unfortunate man did not care to fall into the clutches of the law were, firstly: He was innocent though without the evidence to prove this fact. Secondly, he could much easier ferret out necessary proofs to establish his innocence while at liberty than when confined in prison, where he would be practically helpless.

This was why he had fled to Europe instead of giving him-

self up as he might have done had he been really guilty. His one great hope and aim was to vindicate his honor.

"But how did you dare to come here, father?" asked Will, after the first interchange of tender greetings and explanations. "Do you not realize what a risk you are incurring?"

"I am well aware of that, my son?" replied Mr. Wright. "But I am constantly on my guard. I shall not be caught napping. But my principal reason for coming back to America is that I believe I have the necessary evidence to clear my name, provided I can find Waldo Hill, and make him confess his rascality. I have heard that he was in this region, and it was to find him that I am here."

Air Line Will was astonished.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Do you for a moment imagine that you can make Waldo Hill confess? Oh, no, he is not that kind of a man."

"The right leverage will bend or break the stoutest steel," declared Mr. Wright.

"Have you the leverage?"

"I think I have."

"Ah, what can it be? Nothing of ordinary sort will influence Waldo Hill."

"I am well aware of that," declared Mr. Wright. "But I'll tell you what that leverage is. There is no villain or thief without a certain grain of honor in his composition. Waldo Hill is no exception. In London I came across a notorious crook, called Blind Bill. He is partly blind, yet such an expert forger that he has never been detected in any of his tricks with the pen. He has, however, served terms for other offenses, notably pocket-picking, and only a short while ago he was arrested under suspicion of incendiarism for the burning of a fine house in Sussex. I am the only person who can swear against him, and if I should appear against him at the trial three months hence he would be transported to Tasmania for the offense. He is now in a London prison awaiting trial. From his lips I learned the story of Waldo Hill's rascality, which effected my ruin, and the fellow seemed to take a deep interest in my case. He claimed that Hill owed him a debt which he would not dare disregard, and that at his request, he would confess his machinations and clear me. In return I was not to appear against Blind Bill. The fellow gave me letters and credentials, to present to Hill, which he said would surely bring him to terms, and this is why I am in America. I have searched far and wide for Hill, but have found no trace of him, except in this town."

Will had listened to this recital with breathless interest. But there was a light of strong doubt in his eyes, and he shook his head almost sadly as he said:

"Ah, I fear you will not meet with success, father. Waldo Hill has little regard for honor. Again, I know not where you can find him. If he is in this region, I have never heard of him. His son Chauncey is stopping with my employer, Mr. Vandermeer. It is hardly likely, however, that he will tell you where to find his father, even if he knows."

"So Chauncey is in this town?" asked Mr. Wright, eagerly. "Ah, well, Will, I feel encouraged. There is hard work before me. Be sure that Waldo is somewhere about here then. No light obstacle shall stay me. I will find him and he will not dare refuse his old pal's request."

"I hope you may not find disappointment," rejoined Will. "But Waldo Hill hates you so bitterly that he will be loth to comply. But I will help you all I can. Oh, it would seem almost too much to hope for, that your honor should be cleared at last. What joy it would be."

"You are right, my son. It is the one aim of my life. After that I can die happily."

"But I fear so much for you. There is great danger that you will be identified and arrested before you can see Hill."

"I have taken all possible precautions. I have sought obscure lodgings, and when I go abroad in the daytime, it is in the closest of disguise."

"Do be very careful, and come to me when you can, father. At least we can see much of each other while you are here."

"We will, my son. Pray for my success. Now, good-by."

They clasped hands warmly, and then Will stood alone in the gloom and saw his father's form vanish in the darkness. For some moments he stood thus, and then, clenching his firm right hand, he raised it aloft, and fixing his gaze upon the starry sky above, cried:

"Now, God help me! If Waldo Hill refuses my father's demand, and harm comes to him in this effort to redeem his honor, I will not eat—I will not drink or sleep until I have avenged the bitter wrong. I swear it!"

Then, turning quickly upon his heel, he strode away from the spot.

But he had not been gone many seconds when there was a sudden rustling in the bushes near, and a tall, slender form came out. A thin, malevolent countenance was revealed in the starlight, and the eavesdropper, who was no other than Chauncey Hill himself, gazed after his foe's departing form, and clenched his hands with a fierce, bitter, hushed cry of joy and hate.

"Ah, the devil is on my side," he hissed, triumphantly. "What could have worked better? So that poor fool has come back from the old country, eh? What will my father think when he hears of it, and what luck that I should have got possession of the whole game? Ha, ha, ha! this is the best streak of luck I ever struck. All lies in my grasp now. Ah, Will Wright, if you only know how completely you are in my power you would be glad to beg of me. This is too good for belief. You dare to aspire to the heart of sweet Katie Vandermeer, eh? You poor understrapper, maudlin fool! Never! The prize is mine, and I will win it or die. Now I know how to play my cards, and I will work ruin, defeat, disgrace, and death to my enemies out of this little episode to-night. Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE DANCE.

Leaving the scene of the meeting with his father, Will Wright made all haste back to town. He had ordered a carriage which was in readiness for him at his humble residence when he arrived there. As he was all dressed for the party he did not waste time, but leaped into the carriage and directed the driver to proceed with all haste to the mansion of Mr. Vandermeer.

Arrived at the door of the fine residence, Will felt a slight tremor as it occurred to him as a possibility that the railroad magnate would not permit his daughter to accompany him to the party. But his fears were quickly set at rest.

Mr. Vandermeer himself stood upon the steps and cried out cheerily:

"You are right on time, as usual, my boy. So you have come to take my Katie to the dance, have you? Ah, my boy, I would not intrust my treasure in everybody's hands, be sure, but I feel quite sure that you will care for her."

"Indeed, Mr. Vandermeer," stammered Will, blushing as red as a rose, "I would die for her. That is—I—I will pledge my word no harm shall come to her."

Mr. Vandermeer laughed heartily.

"That is all right," he continued, heartily. "I trust you perfectly, Will. By the way, Katie has told me how you so bravely rescued her from the Indians——"

"Indeed Mr. Vandermeer," protested Will, "that was nothing. It was all much due to her own nerve. Give her the most credit."

The millionaire gripped the young engineer's hand and said with a tremor of emotion in his voice:

"I will not forget that act of yours, Will Wright. I have great faith in you, and I have never met a young man whom I can safely say, I like as well as I do you. Perhaps some day I can fully repay you."

Before Will could say more, Katie, with an elegant wrap concealing her tasty dress for the occasion, came tripping down the steps. She sprang lightly into the carriage, saying gayly:

"You shall not say I am delinquent, Will Wright. Come, let us be off, for we must not miss that first dance anyway, you know. Good-by, papa!"

Her light laugh floated back to the magnate's hearing as the carriage rolled away. Will's natural bashfulness was quickly put to flight by the young girl, whose keen intuition had read his mind like a printed book.

"Do you know," she cried, with a merry laugh, "that I have refused one invitation to the party, so that I might accept yours, ma beau chevalier?"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Will. "Who was the unfortunate crushed individual?"

"No other than Chauncey Hill."

In spite of himself, Will could not help but feel a little thrill of triumph. It looked as though he had worsted his rival quite badly.

"I believe you don't like him," she went on with a roguish laugh. "Well, I don't myself. He is a dreadful bore."

Somehow Will could not help a feeling of gladness at this confession. He was in high spirits when the round-house was reached.

A temporary flooring had been laid for the dance, and the musicians were already in attendance. As Will Wright and his fair partner stepped upon the floor they became the cynosure of all eyes.

A genuine sensation was created. That the daughter of the wealthiest man in Santa Rosa should condescend to come to the railroad men's dance, and in company with the handsome young engineer, was in one respect a great surprise.

But applause greeted her, and from that moment Katie Vandermeer was tenfold a greater favorite with the men on the line, not the least affected in her manners, yet pleasant, cheerful, and amiable, she entered the dance.

The rough men deferred to her in the most gallant fashion imaginable, there was no roughness either of manner or speech, and the ball went on promising to be a grand success, and without one unpleasant feature.

This was the outlook at the end of the fifth dance. Then a little incident occurred which was decidedly unpleasant, especially for Will and Katie.

Chauncey Hill's invitation had been politely refused by Katie, and now, as he saw her present, in company with Air Line Will, the entire malevolence of his revengeful spirit was thoroughly aroused.

He understood plainly that her preference was for the young engineer, and it thoroughly maddened him. The jealousy and hatred of his spirit was fired.

"By the gods of war!" he muttered, "she has actually stooped to come to this dance with that low-born puppy. Oh, well, I will have revenge. She shall feel ashamed of this."

Without considering the consequences, at the first available moment in the dance Chauncey Hill turned haughtily and with most cutting sarcasm remarked:

"Indeed, Miss Katie, the sudden lowering of your tastes to coming to the ball with one whose station is so far below

yours is a great surprise to me. Rather an odd way you have of amusing yourself."

"Oh, no," retorted Katie, with a humorous twinkle of her eyes, and enjoying the fop's chagrin. "I do not agree with you. I very sensibly overlooked the claims of a donkey to accept the companionship of a man. This is something more than amusement—it is good sense."

"Then I am to understand that you declare me a donkey?" asked Hill, furiously.

"Do not appropriate to much," said the young girl, mischievously. "I am really sorry for you, Chauncey. I think your envious disposition needs curbing."

"Envious!" flashed the young villain. "Do you mean to assert that I am envious of such a low-born outcast, a dirty dog? Faugh! I would not wipe my feet on him."

These words had caught the hearing of Air Line Will. He turned about as if upon a pivot, and with flushed face exclaimed:

"If you desire to villify me in any manner, pray choose another time and place. Such language is insulting in the presence of a lady."

"Say you so, puppy!" hissed Hill, savagely. "Then I will intensify the insult and call you a dirty knave, time and place be hanged. Take that!"

With his gloves Chauncey cut the young engineer sharply across the face. Usually Air Line Will had admirable command of himself, but it was such an aggravated circumstance that he could no more have restrained himself than to have brought the moon from its aerial perch.

Quicker than a flash he let out with his right arm, and flung Hill to the floor with fearful force. The villain sprang up, only to be again knocked down.

The young engineer stood over him, trembling with wrath. This time Hill dared not arise, but cowered tremblingly upon the floor.

Of course, the dance was stopped and a tremendous sensation created. Everybody crowded about the pugilistic pair, and now that his wrath was spent Will felt deeply ashamed.

"Indeed, Miss Katie," he said in a low, trembling voice, "what have I done? You will now regret coming here with me, for I have disgraced you."

"No," said the young girl, firmly. "No person will blame you. He insulted us both, and you had provocation. Come, let us forget it all and go on with the dance."

These words were overheard and all echoed the sentiments. Hill suddenly found himself unpopular in the locality, and slunk away while the dance went on, and Katie was so gay and lively that the momentary shadow cast over the affair was effectually displaced.

The dance over, Will saw his fair partner safely homeward and then returned to his lodgings with a delirious sense of happiness. Yet over all a strange foreboding of what he could not tell.

"Perhaps I did wrong in striking him," he reflected that night upon retiring. "But I was driven to it. It galls him to see her give me preference. I love her, and—why should poverty make such a wide gulf between us? My father was once as wealthy as Mr. Vandermeer. In every other way I am her equal. She has given me courage. I will fear no more."

But as he slept that night he did not dream of the dark plans of hatred and revenge which Chauncey Hill was fostering against him. He had gained an implacable, murderous enemy.

The next morning, while at breakfast, a messenger called upon Air Line Will. It was word from Mr. Vandermeer and Will hastened down to the depot quickly.

He met the magnate upon the platform. A train was waiting

ing upon the track, and Will saw with surprise that no one was aboard the engine, which was all in readiness to start.

"I am glad you have come, Will," said Mr. Vandermeer, hastily, in an undertone. "You see, I didn't dare to trust Faulkner, the regular driver of that engine, so I have sent him away on another trip. It is known to but three persons—myself, you, and the president of the Santa Rosa mine—but in that forward car is seventy thousand dollars in gold. Not suspecting its presence, the train robbers will never know of its passage over our road. I want you to take that train down to Lopez. I believe we shall fool Black Waldo and his gang this time."

"I will do it," declared Will, promptly. "But are there armed men in the car?"

"No. The gold even is packed in ordinary flour barrels, so that any spy in seeing it loaded would be deceived."

"The train is ready to start?"

"Yes."

"All right," cried Air Line Will, giving the signal to the conductor. "Let her go. All aboard."

The cry rang along the station platform. People crowded aboard the train, and Will started for the cab of the engine. As he did so he saw suddenly emerge from the crowd and form a line along the platform as quick as a flash a row of men. Revolvers suddenly flashed in their hands, and they held the crowd at bay. Shots were fired over the heads of the people, who fell back in terror, and just as the whole daring scheme became apparent to Air Line Will he saw two men leap aboard the locomotive and open the throttle. The wheels began to move instantly, and the young engineer, forgetful of danger, rushed toward the engine, crying loudly:

"Treachery! The train must not go out!"

But he had not taken three steps when a tremendous blow upon the head from behind stretched him senseless upon the station platform.

CHAPTER VII.

A PERILOUS RIDE.

A more daring scheme than this could not be imagined, and only such a bold, adventurous spirit as Black Waldo's would have been capable of its enactment.

All had been executed in a marvelously quick space of time. The presence of armed men in the crowd had not been suspected until they appeared. That it was a preconcerted move was apparent, but how the outlaws had learned of the presence of the treasure on the train was a mystery.

The time was well chosen. No officers were at hand, and unless they had been present in a large body they could have effected but little aid. The crowd were mostly unarmed men and women, who recoiled in terror before the threatening pistol barrels and forbidding front of the outlaw gang.

Only Air Line Will had dared to make a move toward preventing the execution of the bold operation, and he had been quickly stricken down.

The blow which he received was a terrific one, from a club in the hands of one of the outlaws. Mr. Vandermeer, who had witnessed all, now sprang forward, crying:

"Stop them! Are there no men of grit in this crowd? Rally, all of you. I will lead the way. They must be stopped."

As the last car came along the outlaw gang on the platform sprang aboard, and from the rear car fired shots at those in the depot, scattering them wildly. The passengers on the train, of course, were helpless.

Out of the depot rolled the treasure train, in the hands of

the outlaws. It was a move so daring as hardly to be credited.

That less than twenty men all told should boldly enter the depot in the city of Santa Rosa in broad daylight, and take possession of and boldly drive off with a whole train, on board of which was a treasure of seventy thousand dollars, and all this right in the face of a large crowd, seemed incredible. Yet such was the truth.

For some moments the entire assemblage stood gazing vacantly and silently after the receding train. Then a revulsion of feeling came.

A hoarse roar of excitement arose, and a general cry was heard, which went from lip to lip.

"The vigilants! Call out the vigilants!"

Mr. Vandermeer, in mute despair, had stood gazing after the train, knowing that he was powerless to stay it. Suddenly he came to himself, and the first thing his gaze encountered was the prostrate, insensible form of Air Line Will.

The magnate sprang to the young engineer's side, but a man had already lifted the youth's head, saying firmly:

"Do not interfere with me. I am a doctor. Bring me fresh water, quick!"

The crowd formed a circle, and it was with difficulty that they were held back. But Will had already opened his eyes, and a draught of the water brought him to quickly.

He regained his feet, staggering a trifle, and said brokenly:

"I am all right. I was only stunned. Where is Ignaccio? Bring out 49, and I'll catch the villains for you. Forty-nine can run miles to that locomotive's halves. Hurry—hurry! Put armed men aboard, and I'll catch 'em for you. Hurry, I say!"

The young engineer's tones were earnest, almost pleading. His excitement was very intense, and Mr. Vandermeer failed to comprehend.

"You are badly hurt, Will," he ventured.

"No, no! I am all right!" protested the young engineer. "Do as I say. Call out 49. Give me a car and fifty armed men! Hurry!"

Mr. Vandermeer hesitated only an instant. He caught the doctor's eye and that worthy said:

"He is all right."

This was enough for the magnate. He rushed to the office and struck a gong. Then he sprang to a telegraph instrument, and clicked off the following message to the station below:

"Turn switch, and side track the special whether she stops or not. Robbers aboard of her. No matter if she is wrecked. Obey orders."

The gong called 49 from the round-house. Luckily the fastest engine on the Santa Rosa road was in harness and ready to answer the instant call. While she was shackling onto a car, Mr. Vandermeer rushed out onto the platform, and addressed the crowd.

"Men of Santa Rosa!" he cried. "You know what has been done. You have seen the boldest atrocity on record in this section committed. You will not fail to understand your duty. While this rascally gang exists, human life and property cannot be safe in this region. I want half a hundred brave men this moment. Rifles will be given you in the baggage-room. Respond now!"

The magnate's voice had not died out when a ringing cheer went up. The men of Santa Rosa were made of the right stuff, and double the number called for applied for arms to join the pursuing party.

By this time 49 with a car attached was at the platform.

"All aboard!" was the cry.

Scarcely three minutes were consumed in boarding the train.

Mr. Vandermeer sprang aboard the engine with Air Line Will. Will opened the throttle wide and let the old iron horse bound forward like a thing of life. Out of the depot they sped, and out across the country at maddening speed.

Long lines of track lay ahead, but the flying foe was not yet visible.

It was not altogether possible that the special would be overtaken. If her captors ran her at high speed she must have made a distance which 49 could only overcome in a long run of a hundred miles.

It was not at all likely that the train-robbers would run the train any great distance. Will surmised that they would come to a halt in Deep Gap, unload the treasure, and skip into the hills.

In this he was partly right.

But he never dreamed of the real purpose of the train robbers. On and on, faster and faster flew 49, with her car-load of vigilants.

At every curve, on every grade, Will looked for a distant view of the special. But each time he was disappointed.

"They had quite a start of us," he muttered, after the first half hour. "But I vow they must have run awful fast as well. Come, old horse, you must go faster."

To crowd on more steam was the work of a moment. How 49 did respond to her work. She fled over the steel rails with such speed that a long column of sparks flew from the car wheels.

On and on, faster and faster, madder and madder, and then—a critical moment came.

Just ahead was quite a sharp curve. It was usually customary to slow up here, but Air Line Will's hand never relaxed its hold upon the throttle. Mr. Vandermeer saw and understood, and his face turned a grayish pallor as he sprang up and said in a shouting voice:

"My God, Will! Are you going to try to make it?"

The young engineer's voice had a strange, rasping accent, as he replied:

"I shall make it or leave the iron."

The words rang in the magnate's brain long afterwards. If he had hitherto doubted the young engineer's pluck and judgment he never again did so.

Straight for the curve like a meteor fled the train. Nearer and nearer and now—there was a tremendous swaying and rocking. Mr. Vandermeer was precipitated to the floor of the cab. For a moment they seemed to be whirling in space, the air was filled with blinding dust and fragments of cinders, then the locomotive straightened itself once more.

The curve was passed, and a clear track lay ahead. Through all that fearful moment of uncertainty and peril Air Line Will had clung to his post, and it was his judicious application of the air-brake valve that had steadied the train at the right moment and kept it on the iron.

But the daring feat was a success, and now that the danger was past Mr. Vandermeer became more strongly impressed with the necessity of a clear head and steady hand at the valve and lever. He drew a deep breath and exclaimed under his breath:

"Upon my soul! It is no light thing to be a good engineer. I believe, like poets, they are born to the talent."

A straight track lay ahead. The grade, however, was up, and having now a clear view, Air Line Will experienced a thrill as he saw the rear end of the treasure train at the top of the grade.

"We have overtaken her," he shouted triumphantly, and then came to an instant halt. His face turned a deadly pale, and a gasping cry of horror escaped his lips. The two trains were approaching each other at lightning speed, for he

saw that the treasure train was flying down the grade toward them, instead of away from them.

The truth instantly flashed through his brain. It was the devilish work of the robbers. Having pilfered the train and left it, they had reversed the locomotive lever, and were sending the doomed train back on its course to carry destruction, disaster, and death before it. A more horrible situation than to be in the path of this wild train could hardly be imagined.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

They were directly in the path of the flying train at whose throttle valve no man stood to check its awful speed. More than this, 49 was at her top speed. It seemed inevitable that the trains must meet.

What would be the result of such a collision Air Line Will well knew. It was an awful moment for him, standing as he was thus upon the very brink of eternity's abyss.

Never had he faced so awful a peril. Yet his nerves were like steel. He did not once think of flinching.

But he could not help but see the awful fate before him.

It came over him all in a flood, completely overwhelming his soul for one brief instant.

"God preserve my soul!" he gasped inwardly. "My life is lost!"

Then it occurred to him to act.

Mr. Vandermeer, paralyzed and unable to act, clung to the cab seat. His hat was gone and his face was pallid, and his eyes set and staring. Death faced those in the cab.

Even the Mexican fireman saw the peril and crouched down in abject terror. In that swift instant the question of action had come over Will Wright.

How should he act?

There was hardly time to check, reverse, and get under way again in the opposite direction. Before this could be done they must run at least half a mile, and the special would be into them.

But it was the only move that could be made, so Air Line Will took it with a quick movement; he reversed the lever and sent forth the thrilling call of distress:

"Down brakes."

The call was instantly responded to. The train was brought to a stop despite its high speed in the distance of a few hundred yards by means of the powerful brakes.

But this did not obviate the danger.

There was much valuable time to be lost in getting under way again, and the young engineer had thought of resigning himself to fate when a startling turn in affairs took place.

Could he believe his senses? As the train slackened speed the back rushing special also did the same. Indeed, the two trains rushing down the grade in opposite directions came to a halt not twenty yards apart. But the awful catastrophe was averted.

Then, in explanation of the phenomenon, Will saw a man leap down from the engine of the special and come swiftly toward them. His face was white as chalk, and his manner terrified.

He came up to the cab of 49, and Air Line Will asked excitedly:

"Did you stop that train?"

"I did," was the hoarse reply. "But it was a close call, was it not? The outlaws sent the train back to wreck you. They have got the treasure, and are in the hills. All the passengers except me were dumped in the ditch up there top of the grade. They overlooked me, for I hid in the baggage-car."

"Great heavens, my man!" cried the young engineer, excitedly, "do you know what you have done? More than half a hundred lives were at stake."

"I am glad that I was in time," was the reply. "My name is Jack Davis, and I was on my way to Lopez. I climbed over the tender and got to the lever. I thought I would never get there. In luck, ain't we?"

"Luck!" cried Will, springing down and shaking hands with Jack Davis. "I should say it was your grit that did it. You ought to have a life-saving medal."

"Nonsense!" declared Jack Davis modestly. "Don't give it to a fellow too stout. Kind of tough racket, though, wasn't it? By jinks, they worked it well. What'll ye do now? Foller 'em into the hills, I suppose?"

"Yes," cried the young engineer. "Follow them if need be to Joppa, but we must overtake them and recapture that money."

By this time the armed men on board the train had flocked out of the car and Jack Davis was plied with a score of questions. He answered as best he could, until Mr. Vandermeer gave orders to run back up the grade to where the frightened passengers were waiting.

Jack Davis assumed control of the special's locomotive, and the two trains ran quickly up the grade.

The passengers, all in a state of deepest alarm, and each one minus his valuables, were only too glad to clamber aboard.

Mr. Vandermeer was desirous of accompanying the vigilants into the hills, so he turned to Will and said:

"Will, you go on with the passengers to Lopez and then run back here. We will be at this spot in all likelihood ready to return to Santa Rosa. I have made arrangements with Jack Davis to take 49 back to the round-house."

"Very well, sir," agreed Will, promptly. "And I hope you may overtake the rascals, sir."

"Thank you," said Mr. Vandermeer, with a slight pallor, then lowering his voice. "There may be a hard fight, Will, and—and if I do not return, will you always care for Katie?"

A light flashed in Air Line Will's handsome eyes which came from his soul, and he seized the railroad magnate's hand.

"No such harm will befall you, sir. But if it does, believe me, I will die for her."

Mr. Vandermeer squeezed the young engineer's hand, and with a voice choked with emotion, said:

"I believe you, my boy."

Then he turned away, and Air Line Will returned to his engine with a strange sinister foreboding uppermost in his mind, which he could not dispel.

"All aboard," was the cry, and in a few moments the special was on its way, leaving Mr. Vandermeer and the vigilants on the edge of a Mexican chaparral, in which the train robbers had disappeared with the seventy thousand dollars in gold.

Will ran the special through to Lopez with as much speed as possible. His mind, however, was in a most chaotic state, and he performed his duties in a mechanical, absent-minded sort of way.

The stay in Lopez was brief. The passengers were disposed of, and the train partly filled with new ones going to Santa Rosa. At length the run home was begun.

The special had the clear right of way to Santa Rosa. Not more than half a dozen passengers were on board, and having no station to make Will let the engine slide along quite fast.

It was in the latter part of the day when the top grade was reached where the train was to be held for the return of the vigilants.

Will slowed up gradually, and finally came to a halt at the exact spot where he had taken leave of Mr. Vandermeer. Not a person was in sight anywhere.

The passengers had not seemed inclined to leave their seats, and naturally were impatient at the long delay. Time passed rapidly, and yet the vigilants did not appear.

At intervals Will set the whistle going as a signal, and once fancied he heard a distant rifle shot in response. But he finally concluded this was an illusion.

The western sun was slowly sinking out of sight, and the young engineer was in a quandary. How long ought he to wait thus?

It might be hours—it might be another day—before the vigilants should return to this spot. Yet the young engineer had his orders and was not the one to disobey.

He had taken his own fireman with him—the Mexican, Ignaccio. It had always seemed rather queer to Will that the Mexican, as he claimed to be, should have an Italian name, but lately Ignaccio had explained that his father was really an Italian, and his mother a Mexican lady.

Ignaccio was on one side of the cab and Will the other. Both were looking in the same direction into the chaparral, so that neither caught sight of a couple of stealthy forms which were creeping alongside the tender.

Suddenly Will heard a slight noise, and turning his head, looked into the muzzle of a revolver in the hands of a savage looking brute of a man. Ignaccio was likewise covered by the other.

At the same moment a dozen armed men, with cries of triumph, sprang out of the chaparral and surrounded the train.

Several sprang into the cars, while a tall, dark-featured man at their head, boarded the engine.

All this had been done in the twinkling of an eye. Air Line Will was too overcome with horror to hardly make action. Indeed, it was impossible for him to do so, for the muzzle of the revolver held upon him meant death.

It was a complete surprise. Ignaccio was overturned and bound almost in an instant.

"That is the fellow I want!" cried the dark-featured leader, fixing a piercing gaze upon Will. "Bind him and drag him out of here."

As the brutal ruffians sprang upon him Will made as strong a resistance as he could. But he was a child in the grasp of those stout men.

In less time than it takes to tell it he was bound hand and foot and dragged out of the engine cab. He needed no explanation to apprise him of the fact that he was the captive of Black Waldo, the bandit.

The outlaws went through the train quickly, relieving the passengers of their valuables; but only the engineer and his mate were bound.

This move executed, Will saw the outlaw chief approaching him with a strange, indescribable light of hatred and fury in his eyes.

Instinctively the young engineer felt that a hard fate was in store for him.

CHAPTER IX.

FACING DEATH.

It was with a certain intuition that Air Line Will knew what was coming. There was that in Black Waldo's eyes which satisfied him of the utter futility of a plea for mercy.

This caused his heart to sink a trifle, but it was only for a moment. Then defiance, a natural element, succeeded.

He would rather have met death at once than to be guilty of showing a spark of fear to his villainous captor.

"He knows me and he hates me," reflected Will. "No doubt

he thinks that I have defeated his plans times enough, and he seeks my destruction. Very well, my fine villain. You shall see that I can die like a man."

There was only one ray of hope visible to the young engineer, and this was the possible return of the vigilants.

"So you are Air Line Will, eh?" rasped the outlaw chief, glaring at the young engineer. "This is the first time we have met."

"And you are Black Waldo?" retorted the young engineer, coolly.

"That is who I am."

The ruffian said this with bigotry and bluster. Its effect was lost upon Will, however.

"Well, I must say you are just such a type of the ruffian and blowhard as I thought you were."

The outlaw chief's face flushed hotly.

"You are impudent," he snarled. "Take care. You are at my mercy."

"I would rather be at the mercy of a tiger."

"Well said," exclaimed Black Waldo. "That is what I am—a human tiger—and you will find that your life in my hands is the very smallest sort of consideration. What is the state of your mind? Are you prepared to die?"

"The brave man scorns death. The coward inflicts it upon those he hates."

"By the gods!" roared Black Waldo, angrily. "You are a very impudent young dog. You forget that you are in my power."

"Bah! Why should I fear you. All you can do to me is to take my life."

A cunning light gleamed in the ruffian's small black eyes.

"You are wrong," he said craftily. "I can cause you the most exquisite torture. Indeed, I need not kill you at once, but make you die a thousand deaths in one."

Will shuddered as he reflected upon the utter brutality of the monster.

"It can only end in death," he said.

"Now I will tell you something," said the outlaw chief significantly. "It is very true that I mean to take your life, but it is not for the purpose that you think."

Will looked up in amazement.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Shall I tell you?"

"I would like to know."

"No doubt you fancy that it is simply because you have defeated my games several times and are altogether a stumbling block in my path. That is your belief."

"I know of no other reason why you should seek my life."

"There is such."

Will was thoughtful a moment. He studied the villain's face a moment.

"I cannot say that I understand you," he said.

"Of course," pursued the villain, "you have done me much harm. Several times I have lost a good haul owing to your reckless bravery. Oh, yes, I shall call you brave, for I am not altogether ungenerous to a fallen foe."

"You are considerate," said Will, ironically.

"Sarcasm is out of place," said the outlaw chief, sharply. "But to the point. It is evident that you do not know who I am."

"I know that you are Black Waldo, the train robber. That is all I know of you."

"Exactly! Well now, I am something more than that to you. You could never guess, but I will tell you."

The villain cleared his throat.

"I can remember," he went on, "when you were an infant in your mother's arms. Your father and I were schoolboys together. Afterwards we were partners in business."

A great flood of light broke over Will's handsome pale face, and a cry escaped his lips—a cry of amazement.

"Great heavens!" he cried. "I know you now. You are Waldo Hill."

For a full minute they stood gazing at each other. The young engineer's breath came in quick, eager gasps. The outlaw chief folded his arms, and gazed penetratingly, maliciously at his prisoner.

"You have hit the truth," he finally said. "I am Waldo Hill. It is needless for me to explain to you how your father and I fell out. You, of course, know your father's disgrace."

"For which you are responsible, you scoundrel," burst forth the young engineer. "Oh, you double-dyed fiend! You know that my father was not guilty of that forgery."

The ruffian laughed ironically.

"Well, and what of that?" he asked sneeringly. "What are you going to do about it?"

"It has been my life aim to vindicate my father's honor."

"Well, you will never do it."

"If you were a man with a spark of honor in your soul you would do it."

"Excuse me," said the outlaw, with a mocking smile. "You forget that I am a villain, and villains have honor only among themselves."

"You know that my father was innocent."

"Well, what of it?"

"Why did you criminate him?"

"Need you ask that question?"

"Because you hated him and wished to effect his ruin."

"Well, let it go at that. It seems my golden opportunity has not entirely vanished, for after all these years I am given a new chance to strike him a death blow, by ridding the world of his beloved son."

"You are a fiend!" gritted Will.

"I know it!"

"Have you no mercy at all?"

"Not in the least. You know that I am called Black Waldo, the Merciless."

"What did my father ever do to you that you should entertain such vengeful feelings toward him?"

A dark cloud swept over Black Waldo's face. He muttered an oath beneath his beard, and with a savage gesture replied:

"That is between him and I. He made of me the blood-thirsty ruffian I am. You need never know why. It is enough to say that I hate him, and I hate his offspring to the death."

These words were gritted savagely between his teeth, and caused Will a shudder. He now realized in what a desperate situation he was placed.

Black Waldo suddenly turned, and a fiendish light shone in his eyes as he cried:

"You have also crossed the path of my boy Chauncey. You seek to rob him of the girl he loves. Is it not so?"

"I may tell you that his love is in vain," replied Will, coolly. "The young lady detests him."

"And all owing to you. I can see how it is. There is in the son the same elements of the father. You would cross my boy's life even as your father crossed mine."

"Far from it," replied Will, firmly. "There is nothing but friendship as yet between Katie Vandermeer and myself. There may never be anything more, for the poor engineer could scarcely dare hope to wed with one of her high position."

There was almost sadness in Will's voice; but it was lost upon Waldo Hill. He was wrought up to a wild pitch of vengefulness, and was about to turn away, when an inspiration came to the young engineer.

"One word more, Waldo Hill!" he cried eagerly, and as the ruffian turned to listen he continued excitedly, "I want to tell

you that an old pal of yours, Blind Bill—do you know him?"

An odd light overspread Waldo's face, and he gave a great start.

"Yes," he replied. "What of it?"

"He is in jail in London, and will be transported for incendiaryism if convicted at his trial next September. My father is the witness, and if he appears against him Blind Bill goes up; if not, he will be acquitted. My father has come all the way from England with a message from Blind Bill, asking you to vindicate my father's honor, on the condition that he will not appear against him. He said you would not dare to refuse that request."

Black Waldo seemed seized with sudden strange emotions. He turned deadly pale and trembled like one with the ague.

"Is that true?" he rasped.

"It is," replied Will.

"Well, Chauncey, my boy, told me something of the kind. However, the petition hasn't reached me yet, and I can get in one more good dig at Jim Wright, your father. Say your prayers, for your time has come."

Black Waldo made a signal to a number of his men. While he had been talking with Will the men, by previous direction, had separated the engine from the train by a dozen feet, and set the brakes on the latter.

Will was led into this gap, and a rope fastened under his shoulders was attached to the locomotive, and another rope tied about his ankles was hitched to the stationary car. A man in the cab had his hand on the throttle ready to start at a signal which must pull the young engineer into pieces. A more terrible thing could not be conceived.

"Ha, ha!" roared Black Waldo, fiendishly. "You see, my young coxcomb, what an appropriate funeral I have prepared for you. It is quite fitting that you should meet death at the heels of your own locomotive. One word from me and you shall be torn asunder. And now I give the word. So die all the enemies of Black Waldo. Pull open the throttle! Let her go!"

CHAPTER X.

A MIDNIGHT RIDE.

Words are utterly inadequate to describe the true position of Air Line Will, with all its intensity of horror and utter desperation.

He was a brave youth, but the stoutest heart might have quailed before this most fiendish device of the outlaw chief's. To be shot or hanged was a fate not so unpleasant, but the prospect of being pulled to pieces, slowly tortured to death in this atrocious manner, was something more than human nerves could well stand.

A shuddering moan broke from Will's lips. This wrung a cry of exultation from Black Waldo.

"Ah, I thought so," he cried fiendishly. "I thought I would bring you down from your lofty perch, my fine bravo. Not so pleasant, is it, to think of being pulled to pieces. Ha, ha, ha!"

Black Waldo had given the order to go ahead, with an idea of striking terror into his victim's soul. He had no purpose of ending his life at once. It was his fiendish desire to torture him, so while he was giving the order to go ahead he had made a gesture of restraint to the man in the engine cab. The locomotive did not stir.

At sound of his taunting words Will had instantly assumed a brave front again. His lips were moving in prayer. If he must, then let it be like a man.

He ignored the villain's taunts, and finally, satisfied that his words had no effect upon his victim, Black Waldo gave the word to go ahead.

"Let her go this time," he cried. "Pull the young puppy to pieces."

Will felt that his last moment had come. Once more he uttered a prayer and closed his eyes.

He felt the engine move, the cords tightened about his ankles, and he felt himself lifted from his feet. He was driven to desperation, made a vain effort to writhe from his bonds, and then——

Crack—ack!

The report of several rifles blended in one came to his hearing. Out of the chaparral bounded a number of excited men. They were the vigilantes returned, and in the nick of time.

Will heard their shots, knew that aid was near, but would it come in time? The engine was moving, and he could feel the terrible cords drawing upon him. Oh, God! would they come in time to cut those cords or to check the locomotive which was so slowly but surely lessening his chances for life?

Now he was extended at full length; he felt his sinews cracking, and an awful faintness came over him. Black Waldo's curses rang in his ears with the report of rifles, and then——

A revulsion came. He felt his frame relax, knew that he was supported tenderly in the arms of friends, and recovered from his swoon of horror.

He was saved! Mr. Vandermeer at the head of the vigilantes had scoured the country about in vain for some trace of Black Waldo. Returning, they had been in time to recognize the villainous purpose of the outlaw chief, and one of their number had fired a shot which killed the engineer before he could open the throttle wider.

Another of the vigilantes reached the spot just in time to sever the cords with his knife at a blow and save Air Line Will from a most awful death.

Black Waldo had been driven back into the chaparral on the other side of the tracks. A great many were desirous of giving chase, but Mr. Vandermeer would not listen to this.

It was getting late, and he believed that nothing would be gained by attempting chase through a section with which they were not at all acquainted.

"The best thing we can do is to return to Santa Rosa and reorganize," he said. "Then we will lay for Mr. Black Waldo, and the siege will not be raised until he is captured."

Many others sensibly arrived at the same conclusion, so preparations were made for the return. Will was warmly congratulated on his narrow escape by all, and then the start was made.

The run back to Santa Rosa was quickly made, and was devoid of incident.

Almost the first person that Will met on leaving the round-house was Chauncey Hill. Walking straight up to the young fop he exclaimed sharply:

"Look here, Mr. Chauncey Hill, I had a little experience with your father to-day. You have great reasons for putting on airs, haven't you, when your own father is a cut-throat and a blackleg!"

"Sir!" exclaimed Chauncey, aghast at the denunciation. "I would have you understand that my father is nothing of the kind."

"Oh, that will do," said Will, with enjoyment of the situation. "He told me so with his own lips, though he likely would not have done so if he had not firmly believed that the next moment would see me a corpse. You see, Chauncey, I am up to your little game. It is too deep and dangerous to be safe. I'd advise you to drop it. Good-day."

Will raised his hat mockingly and passed on. Chauncey was speechless with chagrin and dismay.

"Well, by the gods!" he exclaimed, in a drawling voice. "Here's a pretty how-de-do. Has he really met father, and was he foolish enough to tell him who he was? Hang it! Luck is going against me again. If she finds it out then I am truly lost."

Chauncey referred rather indirectly by the word "she" to Miss Katie Vandermeer, whom he had not yet given up hopes of winning. More than ever now he was determined that Air Line Will should be removed from his path.

His face darkened, and the veins stood out upon his temples in great knots. He was a victim of the most intense mental excitement, for he saw what his father's rash admission had precipitated upon him.

He would now stand out before the whole community as the son of the detested outlaw, Black Waldo. Indeed, if he escaped the wave of popular opinion and was not lynched himself he would be lucky. More than this, he knew that it forever spoiled his chances of winning Katie Vandermeer by anything like fair means.

"By heaven, she shall be mine!" he muttered. "There is just enough of the Hill blood in me to win her, by fair means or foul. But I may as well throw all further forbearance to the winds. That young cub of an engineer has gained her regards, and I have been twice rejected by her, and the last time very coldly."

He compressed his thin lips, and a curse dropped from them.

"Away with all further dallying," he gritted, determinedly. "Henceforth it shall be an open game. In my power in the heart of Deep Gap Mountain, where is my father's stronghold, I'll bring her to terms as sure as I live. I will do it."

He started away rapidly down the street. He had soon arrived at the station and found an excited crowd. In a very few moments he had learned all the particulars of the seventy thousand dollars steal and the pursuit of the special.

He experienced a thrill of triumph as he reflected that his father had bagged such a large amount. A determination seized him.

He looked at his watch. It was barely eight o'clock in the evening.

"I will do it," he muttered. "I will go this very night."

He turned away from the railroad station and, passing into another street, entered a livery stable. A man met him at the door.

"I want Lightning," he said. "Put on the Mexican saddle and the easy bit. I am going on a long ride."

"All right, sir," replied the groom, for such he was. It was here that Chauncey kept his horses, for he had several blooded ones.

In a few moments the horse, a fine thoroughbred, was led out. Chauncey vaulted into the saddle and rode away.

Through the town and out upon the plain he went at a swift gallop. He took a westward course and kept it steadily. The hours passed, three, four, five, and he still kept up that swinging gallop, pausing only at rare intervals to allow the horse a breathing spell.

Soon a mighty range of hills rose before him. Entering these he cantered through gloomy defiles and around the crests of eminences. Fortunately, the moon lent resplendent radiance to the open country.

In this way he kept on until the gray light of the morning began to appear in the East. Suddenly reining up his horse he executed a peculiar cry which sounded like the hoot of an owl.

A few seconds later it was answered, and turning his horse into a narrow defile to the left, he came out presently into a small valley hemmed in by the hills. Here, before his gaze,

were a number of log cabins and adobe huts. They were the abodes of the gang of train robbers of which Waldo Hill was the leader.

A single man stood in the narrow pass leading down into the valley. He held a rifle at his shoulder with a bead drawn upon Chauncey.

"Halt where you are!" he cried, stolidly. "Give me the password or I'll drop ye!"

Chauncey laughed harshly, but quickly replied:

"A gentleman of fortune rides this way. Per Dios! Why will you exact that of me every time, Miguel? Stand aside!"

The sentry stepped aside and Chauncey passed into the robbers' stronghold.

CHAPTER XI.

A VILLAINOUS SCHEME.

"So it is **you**, Chauncey Hill," exclaimed the sentry addressed as Miguel. "Why this visit at this unseemly hour?"

"I haven't any time for palaver," said Chauncey, testily, and throwing the bridle rein to the other. "I want to see my father."

"Ah, senor, your father sleeps."

"I don't care for that. Wake him up."

"Is it important?"

"Of course it is, you blockhead. Come, hurry up, or I'll have you flogged. Go on!"

"Well," said Miguel, hesitatingly, "I'll call him, though he'll be loth to rise, I know. But——"

"Spare yourself the trouble," said a gruff voice. "What on earth is this, anyway?"

A burly form had stepped out of the gloom and faced Chauncey. It was Black Waldo himself.

"Father!" exclaimed the young rascal. "This is luck. I am glad to find you up."

"But what are you here for at this hour?" grunted the outlaw chief.

"I cannot tell you here. I must see you in private. It is a matter of importance."

"Come with me," said the outlaw chief, and he led the way through the collection of huts and along the spur of mountain ridge until they came out upon a table-like shelf of rock from which the country bathed in moonlight could be seen for miles about.

Here the outlaw chief seated himself upon a huge boulder and said brusquely:

"Now be brief."

"I will," replied the son tartly. "I can see that you are not in a good humor. Yet I cannot understand why, since you were blessed with such a lucky haul to-day."

The outlaw started.

"Then you have heard of it?" he asked.

"I have, indeed; it has turned the little city of Santa Rosa upside down with excitement."

"Ah!" exclaimed the outlaw with a chuckle. "They will some time learn that Black Waldo is not to be trifled with."

"The exploit has certainly made a sensation, but there is one circumstance which no doubt caused you almost as much disappointment as me."

The outlaw started.

"Ah, what is that?"

"Your failure to rid your path and mine of a dangerous obstacle—that young engineer."

"You are right," he gritted. "He has the liver of a cat. But his time will come. No man can long incur the risks that he does and survive. He will yet come down."

"Without doubt," agreed Chauncey. "Yet he has done me such harm already that I shall feel compelled to throw off the mask I have been wearing."

"Why?"

"Can you not see? You, very indiscreetly—pardon me, but it was indiscreet—told him who you were. I am exposed now as the son of Black Waldo. My life is hardly safe in Santa Rosa, and my chances for winning the hand of Katie Vandermeer in a fair manner forever lost. Of course they will never receive me at their house again. This is what I call hard luck."

"The deuce take it," gritted Black Waldo. "What a fool I was. Yes, I was indiscreet, as you say. But what will you do? Give her up?"

"Give her up?" repeated Chauncey, in an indescribable tone. "Is it like the Hills to ever give up anything they set their hearts upon? Not while life lasts will I give up my chances for winning Katie Vandermeer."

"But how will you win her?"

"There is a way."

"Don't hazard anything for a pretty face, Chauncey. The world is full of such girls, more easily won, perhaps."

"Never! There is not another such as Katie Vandermeer on the face of the earth. Oh, do not fear; I will do nothing rash. But it will be easy enough to entrap the bird and bring it here. Time and argument will carry the day."

Black Waldo laughed heartily.

"Always up to some wild escapade!" he cried. "Well, good luck, my boy, but I am afraid you'll find you have caught a Tartar. There's a good deal of vim in that girl, you bet!"

"That is all right," said Chauncey, confidently. "I'll find a way to tame her."

"And this is what you wanted to see me about?"

"Yes."

"What can I do?"

"You can help me."

"How?"

"Give me carte-blanche with your men. From this on I am an outlaw, too."

"Of course you can have the men!" declared Waldo. "And you will be welcome here. I shall make you my first lieutenant."

"There are two things I wish to accomplish."

"What are they?"

"The winning of Katie Vandermeer, and the vanquishing of that young upstart Will Wright. Just as you disagreed with my father, I now disagree with him."

"Should this human nature," declared Black Waldo emphatically. "I might as well be with you, my son. It is my purpose now to square my bets forever with Jim Wright."

"And I with his son."

"Then the compact is made."

"Yes."

"All right. Henceforth, come and go here as you please, but be foxy, my boy. We are to deal with a sharp crowd."

"Leave that with me, my father," said Chauncey Hill as he moved away. "I am now going back to Santa Rosa. I will report to you soon. Fortune be with you. Good-night."

"Good-night, my son."

Black Waldo stood quite still, and watched the young villain out of sight. For a moment he was buried in thought, then he muttered:

"Ay, the hatred of the father is transmitted to the son. By my soul, I will see to it that my boy gains his ends. No spawn of my hated foe shall come between him and his desired ends. So Jim Wright has dared to come into this region, eh? Poor, mad fool! He has come to his death!"

"Be not so sure of that, Waldo Hill," said a calm voice, and a tall form arose from the ground almost at the outlaw chief's feet.

Black Waldo gave a spasmodic cry and a great leap backwards at the same time. He crouched like a panther before the speaker, who, with folded arms and bared head, stood before him.

"Jim Wright!" he gasped. "You here?"

"I am here, Waldo Hill," said Mr. Wright, for he it was. "I have searched long and wide, and have found you at last. We could not have met in a better spot, or at a better time."

"What do you want?" asked the outlaw, in sullen tones. "What are you here for?"

"To see you."

"What do you want of me?"

"I will tell you. In all this wide world you are the only man who can clear me of the stigma of forgery. I am here to demand of you a full vindication of my honor."

"You might as well have stayed in England," snarled the villain.

"Then you will refuse me?"

"Of course I do. Do you take me for a fool?"

"There is no reason why you should not grant my request. I never did you an injury, Waldo Hill. It was you who betrayed my confidence and ruined me. It was but fair in atonement for such wrongs that you should shoulder that crime of which you are justly guilty, not I."

"And that is what you have come here to-night for?"

"Yes."

"Well, you are a fool."

"Why do you refuse me?"

"Why?" snarled the outlaw, savagely. "Don't you know? I have always hated you with all my heart and soul. I brought about your ruin, Jim Wright, now I will end the feud by taking your life."

"My life?"

"Yes."

"I am well armed."

Waldo made a gesture of scorn.

"Do you think I am a fool?" he gritted. "Not much. Do you know what kind of a trap you've run your neck into? Why, man, you are right in my stronghold, and a word, a gesture from me would surround us with armed men. You are entrapped!"

There was the silence of death for several moments. The wronged fugitive's face was marble white, but he was composed and cool.

"Neither have I come here unprepared, Waldo Hill," he said slowly and sternly. "I am not such a fool as you are apt to think me. You will not dare to call your men, neither will you dare molest me, when I tell you that I have word from your old pal, Blind Bill. Of course you remember him."

Waldo Hill turned deadly pale, and a gasping cry escaped his lips. It was his turn now to manifest emotion.

"Blind Bill!" he gasped. "You are lying. He is dead. What do you know of Blind Bill?"

"I know this, that he was your pal, and that you would not dare refuse him a request, no matter what it is."

"And you have a request from him?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Mr. Wright extended a sealed note to the outlaw chief. Hill hesitated a moment, but finally took the envelope, and bursting it, read the contents of the note inclosed. It had a curious effect upon him.

CHAPTER XII.

FACE TO FACE.

The moonlight in the place was so exceedingly bright that Black Waldo was enabled to read with ease the coarsely written lines of the note. Thus it read:

"Dear Wall.—No doubt yew will be s'prised tew larn that I'm in an English jug, an' it warn't fer no foolish offens ether. I shall take a slide down to Tasmany if this gentleman wot bears this note appears agin me. That wud be very awkward for me, don'tcherknow, deah boy, fer I'm not one of the blawsted Britishers yet, don'tcherknow, an' I've a date tew fill in New York this winter. Now I want yew tew let this man off, and show up his reckard straight. Do this fer me—don't fail. If yew do, you know what'll come. Tasmany ain't so far off, nor the world ain't so wide, but I'll come square. Yewrs, fraternally,
Blind Bill."

This rather singular and at least original epistle had a powerful effect upon the outlaw. He read and re-read it several times before he was able to make up his mind what course to pursue.

Mr. Wright watched him the while with more than ordinary interest. At length he ventured to say:

"You will see that that request is not one to be disregarded."

"Well, p'raps not," said Black Waldo in a harsh, unnatural voice. "I did tell Bill that I'd do anything he asked me to. But this is a little too much, and I think he has taken a little too much on himself to presume to dictate to me what I'll do. He's in the jug and a good ways off. If he goes to Tasmania he'll likely not return alive. I can't see that I am in any way bound to stand by that agreement unless I feel like it."

"It is not possible that you will dare refuse that request, Waldo Hill," exclaimed Mr. Wright, in a voice of great trepidation. "Think of it well, I warn you."

"Dare," exclaimed the outlaw chief with bravado, "I dare do anything. Who shall say nay to Black Waldo? Listen, those poor fools who operate this railroad through these hills will find out before long that Black Waldo is king. I fear neither man nor devil."

"But Blind Bill was very sure that you would heed this request. I would not have come this far if I had not felt confident of success."

"Well, I kin tell ye now that ye've been a fool. Blind Bill can't harm me where he is. I'll take chances."

"Then you flatly refuse my request?"

"I do."

"Very well," said Mr. Wright in a changed voice. "You will live to regret this, Waldo Hill."

"You will live to regret nothing very long. No, you needn't draw any pistol. You are wholly in my power, and daylight will see you swinging from yonder tall pine."

The threat was ominous, and might have chilled the stoutest heart. There was no doubt but that the fugitive was wholly in the power of the bandit chief in one sense. Yet his manner was cool and courageous.

"I do not fear any such contingency, Waldo Hill," he said coolly.

The outlaw was astonished.

"Well, you're a cool one. What is to hinder, I'd like to know."

"I am not exactly a fool, Waldo Hill, I did not place myself in your clutches without counting the costs. You will hardly dare to detain me from leaving this spot."

"We shall see."

A whistle was at the outlaw chief's lip, but he did not blow it. A commanding gesture of his foe restrained him.

"Hold!" cried Mr. Wright in a ringing voice. "You are scarcely so foolhardy as to do me harm, Waldo. What if I do not return to London? Blind Bill will be acquitted."

He said no more. An ague fit seemed to have seized the outlaw, and a gurgling gasp escaped him as he exclaimed incoherently:

"I'm a fool; you're right, I'd rather have the devil after me than Blind Bill; you are safe. Go your way."

Yet his unwelcome visitor stayed.

"I am not yet through with you, Waldo Hill," he said in a voice of steel. "You fear this man Blind Bill. You know that he is a fiend, that no matter what your hiding place or your power, he will find you out and revenge himself upon you. You can well fear him as an avenger, for nothing defeats him. Refuse to vindicate my honor, and I will return your answer to him, will compromise with him to gain his acquittal, and——"

"No, no, no!" shrieked the wretch. "Say no more. I will grant you anything—name your terms."

He was the perfect representation of abject fear and dread. Trembling in every limb the hardened monster crouched before Mr. Wright like a whipped cur. It seemed as if the fugitive had gained a victory.

"My terms you well know," he said in a steel-like voice. "I need not repeat them."

"Yes, yes. I will agree to anything—I will do what you say."

"Then the contract is made. You are to formally appear in court in New York city and depose on your oath the entire truth connected with those forged notes and bonds——"

"Wait!"

"What!"

"How can I do that?"

The villain had in a measure recovered himself and his old cunning asserted itself. But his former partner was not blind to this.

"There is nothing to hinder you but a simple spirit of revenge upon me."

"Yes, there is more. The moment I appear in a court in New York city and confess to the forgery of those notes, then it means twenty years in State's prison."

Silence reigned for a moment. Here was truly an obstacle. It seemed that in no other way could the vindication be brought about.

Hill himself should appear before a justice and make a full and free confession on personal affidavit. But of course under doing this he must criminate himself.

"Well," said Mr. Wright finally, "it is for you to which is the lesser of the two evils, and accept ~~one~~ are not other."

"Whew!" exclaimed the outlaw chief, in amazement. "I must say you are a cool one. Give up my present life of liberty and enjoyment to accept a home in State's prison, and all merely to oblige you——"

"Or Blind Bill."

"Curse Blind Bill! He cannot do me harm here in my own stronghold. I will be on the watch for him. Let him come and meet his fate here. No, I will never yield to your demands, Jim Wright, and it may as well be settled now as later. You must die! By the ghost of Caesar, I'll have your life!"

Wholly upon impulse, and throwing all prudence or former fears to the winds, and with the one mad desire uppermost in his breast to crush this man whom he so thoroughly hated in his brutal fashion, Waldo Hill threw himself bodily upon his foe with the utmost violence.

A knife gleamed in his right hand, and twice he stabbed his intended victim, once in the arm and again in the neck.

But with an almost superhuman effort Mr. Wright wrested the blade from him and flung it into the darkness. Then they grappled, and the struggle became one of the most desperate, sanguinary contests that ever the midnight moon looked down upon.

Hill was vastly superior in strength to Wright—and for a time it seemed as if he must hold the mastery. But the more slender man hung on like grim death, and finally the outlaw was glad to accept an opportunity offered him to cast his foe off.

In the struggle they had drawn near to the edge of the shelf of rock. Below a hundred feet were the swirling waters of a stream. It was a steep declivity, yet there was enough to break one's fall, and afford a possibility of saving one's life. However, acting upon impulse, Hill suddenly drew his antagonist near to the edge, and with a tremendous effort of the muscular power flung him over.

Down the declivity went Wright with frightful speed. Then there was a mighty splash in the water, and a moment later Hill uttered a baffled curse as he saw his intended victim crawl out of the water and disappear in the depths of the defile.

"Curses!" he gritted. "He will get away from me. This won't do. Ho, all hands out, and give chase. Ho, there!"

In response to the cry there was sudden commotion in the outlaw camp. Men came rushing out with weapons in their hands, and all was excitement.

The fugitive, weak and faint from loss of blood, went staggering away down the defile. He stumbled along scarcely knowing where his footsteps carried him, and could hear with a chill of despair his pursuers close in the rear.

Should they overtake him he knew it meant death. On he went with desperation born of despair. Suddenly he came to a steep embankment. At the same moment far in the distance he heard a shrill whistle.

"The railroad," he cried intensely, "and the train is coming. Oh, if I could only stop it. But I must do it. It is my only hope."

He crawled up the embankment and onto the moonlit track, loss of blood making him weaker every moment. His breath came shorter every moment, and he could hear his foes coming cursing down the mountain side.

Now, far up the track was the red headlight of the coming train. Its roar was plainly heard. The fugitive stood in the water of the rails and waved his arms wildly. Oh, God! Should they see him, would they stop? Nearer the train came and with a mighty rush and roar, and wholly exhausted he sank as if between the rails. Had the world depended then he would not have moved from the track of that oncoming train and death.

CHAPTER XIII.

SAVED.

Mr. Vandermeer, upon entering the office that night upon his return from the exciting episode at Deep Gap, received an unexpected bit of news which was not at all cheering. The engineers and firemen of the road, with one exception of course, Air Line Will, had struck, not for higher pay, but from fear of the outlaws.

"Tell me just how it is, Mr. Vandermeer," said Ike Forbes, a special driver. "Life is too short to throw it away in such a foolish fashion. Any time we are apt to be shot down like dogs going down this line. When Black Waldo and his gang are wiped out then we'll be glad to come back to work."

"Indeed," exclaimed Mr. Vandermeer, compressing his lips. "I fear it will then be too late for you. Now is the most critical moment in the history of this railroad. We need men of pluck and nerve. Shall a wretch like Black Waldo obstruct the operations of this railroad. Not much. The very moment that we show we are afraid of him then our cause is lost. What is needed is for every man to stand right at the helm and fight it out on a straight course. If you desert us now it will be forever."

Mr. Vandermeer spoke calmly, quietly, but firmly. He meant every word he said.

It had its effect upon the men. But their fear of Black Waldo outweighed all else.

"We cannot throw our lives away, sir," said Ike Forbes respectfully. "We are men of family, and must look to the future of our offspring."

"Do you pause to reflect what effect this will have upon my business?" asked Mr. Vandermeer. "Thousands of dollars will be my loss if trains are suspended on my road. Furthermore, it will give the outlaws fresh courage."

"We cannot help that, sir. We are acting upon what we believe are the dictates of prudence and common sense."

"Very well. Please step to the desk and get your pay. I shall have no further need of your services."

The men were paid off, and left the office. Mr. Vandermeer looked at the schedule and saw that it was within a very few moments of time for the Juanita way train to go out.

He immediately donned his hat and coat, saying to the astonished clerk:

"Clear the track ahead just the same for the way train. I am going to take it down to Juanita myself."

The words had barely left his lips when he felt a touch upon his arm. Turning quickly he was face to face with Air Line Will.

"You may remain here, Mr. Vandermeer," he said, firmly. "I am going down with the way train."

"You?" exclaimed the magnate.

"Yes. I shall be back shortly before four o'clock in the morning. Which will give me plenty of time to sleep before the Lopez express goes out. In the meantime, I will fetch up new men from Juanita to take the place of these mutinous dogs. I will stand by you to the last."

Mr. Vandermeer wrung the young engineer's hand with much feeling, and returned to his desk. Two minutes later Air Line Will, with his overalls on, leaped aboard the engine of the way train, and it was very soon on its way to Juanita.

The run down through Deep Gap was without incident. Nothing was seen of the train robbers, and Will started back a little after eleven o'clock.

It was a beautiful moonlit night, and he could see the track ahead for more than half a mile. The precipices and crags of Deep Gap had loomed up in sight when a very startling incident occurred.

Will turned to oil some gearing, leaving Ignacio, his fireman, to watch outside. A sudden, sharp cry escaped the stoker's lips.

"Quick—come quick!" he cried. "Por Dios! Senor Will, there is something on the track."

The train had just turned a curve. In an instant Will was at the cab window. He strained his gaze down the moonlit track.

Air Line Will's vision was particularly good, and he saw what he rightly took for the figure of a man standing between the rails and waving his arms wildly. Then he saw him sink down as in a faint between the rails.

All this Air Line Will saw in one brief second. He was very quick to act. An exclamation escaped his lips, and quick

as a flash he pulled the whistle valve and sent a sharp shriek out upon the night air.

"Down brakes!"

Then he brought the locomotive down to a slow rate of speed and stopped the train within fifty feet of the figure of the unknown. There was great excitement aboard the train, and several of the brakemen went forward with the conductor to investigate.

Air Line Will, from his post in the cab, watched with deepest interest. He saw them lift the body of the unknown and bring it along to the baggage car.

"Who is it, Martin?" he asked one of the brakemen, as he came alongside.

"I don't know, sir," was the reply. "Some poor fellow with some knife wounds in him. Likely he was waylaid by robbers. Perhaps the gang of Black Waldo himself."

Will drew a deep breath of relief.

"It was mighty lucky the moon was out," he declared, "or the train would have passed over him surely, for I never could have seen him in time. Ah, what's that?"

The sharp crack of several revolvers rang out upon the night air, and the young engineer saw several dark forms on the track ahead. It needed nothing more than instinct to tell him the truth.

As he did so dark forms swarmed out of the gulch and endeavored to clamber aboard. One man did actually succeed in getting upon the engine, but Ignaccio with the fire-shovel knocked him off.

Every window in the cab was riddled with bullets, yet Will escaped being hit. He was wholly regardless of the awful danger, and seemed to bear a charmed life.

The car platforms were valiantly defended, and in a few seconds the way train was flying down the track like the wind, leaving the foe far behind.

It was a narrow escape, for had the armed villains succeeded in boarding the train all would have been lost. Will let the locomotive out for all it was worth, and ran home to Santa Rosa at a sixty-mile gait all the way.

The way train was welcomed in the depot by Mr. Vandermeer and quite a large crowd, which had waited all night, for even bets had been made that the train would not return.

"You have done nobly," he cried enthusiastically. "We could not do anything if it was not for you, Will. I will not forget you when these dark clouds pass over."

"Rest assured, Mr. Vandermeer," said Will earnestly. "I will stick to you and the railroad as long as life lasts in my body."

But Will was curious to see the strange man picked up on the track, and he went along to the baggage car. As he did so a man with a bandage about his head and another around his arm descended slowly from the car. At sight of him Will gave a gasping cry, and exclaimed under his breath:

"My father!"

Mr. Wright—for he it was, as the reader has doubtless guessed—returned Will's gaze with a glance of recognition. Otherwise they did not betray acquaintance.

How his father came in that state, and what he had been doing in Deep Gap, at that hour of the night, was something of an enigma to Will until he chanced to think of Waldo Hill. Then it all flashed over him.

But he was desirous of an interview with his father, so he turned to Mr. Vandermeer and said:

"I will be on hand to take out the express. You may count upon me."

Then he ran his engine down to the round-house, and af-

ter the performance of a few duties, started back to the station on foot.

It was that darkness which prevails just before dawn, and Will had barely emerged from the round-house when a form appeared in his path from the deep shadows to his right.

CHAPTER XIV.

RIPPING UP THE RAILROAD.

Will was not alarmed. He knew instinctively who it was, and allowed himself to be led to a more secluded spot.

"I have had a terrible experience, my son," said Mr. Wright and then proceeded with a complete account of his meeting with Black Waldo. When he had finished Will drew a deep breath and said:

"Only Providence saved your life, father, I am very sorry. It is as I feared, your plan has failed."

"Alas! I fear that is too true," said Mr. Wright, dejectedly. "What shall I do, Will? Indeed, I am quite in despair."

"Father!" said the young engineer with deep feeling. "as soon as this gang of villains has been routed out, and Mr. Vandermeer's interests once more safely established, I shall give up my position here and we will seek a new home in some foreign land. We will never be separated again in life. God knows that you are innocent, and let that be our comfort."

"No," said Mr. Wright with a voice trembling with deepest emotion. "I cannot consent to your exile on my account, although that may mean our separation. I know that your deepest interests are here, and you must remain here. Wherever I go, Will, my heart will always be with you."

"But, father——"

"Do not gainsay my wish. I desire that you remain in Santa Rosa. I feel sure that your happiness is here. But I have not altogether lost hope that all will come out right yet. Here is the idea: If I do not appear against Blind Bill he will be acquitted. I believe that I can influence his mind against Hill, and that he will come here in person and demand that which Hill will not dare to refuse. Do you see?"

"I hope you may succeed," said Will, fervently. "I shall pray for you, father."

"Thank you, my son. And now I will take leave of you."

"But you are wounded."

"Do not fear for that. My injuries are not serious and soon be all right. And now farewell."

He disappeared in the darkness, leaving Will with an altogether satisfactory frame of mind. The young engineer turned away and walked slowly back to his lodgings.

He had undergone much that night. Yet when his head touched the pillow it was not to sleep. At an early hour he arose unrefreshed, and again went down to the round-house.

Until it was time for the express to go out Will remained here. He did not even go to his breakfast. He could not eat, and a strange cloud seemed hanging over him like a dread premonition of evil.

Somehow he felt that the day was to bring forth new and thrilling changes, and he made preparations accordingly.

To the roof of the cab he secured a couple of Winchester rifles, with several rounds of ammunition. There was every reason to believe that the train gang would try to wreck the express upon this trip, in revenge for the escape of their would-be victim of the previous night.

Ignaccio, the stoker, came around a little later, and Will said to him:

"Juan, perhaps you will not care to risk your life on another trip down the line. If you have any fears I would rather you would not go."

The swarthy fellow looked up in surprise.

"Why, Senor Will!" he exclaimed. "You surprise me. You should know me better than that. Where you go, so will I, even if it be to death."

"You are a brave fellow, Juan," said the young engineer with fervor. "Indeed, I have all confidence in you. Give me your hand."

They gripped hands, and more passed between them in that pressure than could have been expressed in many words. Then they sprang aboard the engine, and Will ran her down and hitched onto the express. A few seconds later he was at the station waiting for the starting gong.

Passengers were few. The aggressive actions of the train robbers had spread far and wide, and people were alarmed. Mr. Vandermeer was upon the platform, and with him were seven armed men.

A guard of safety, as it might be called, boarded the engine car and concealed themselves therein. Then the express started on her long run of two hundred miles.

Out of Santa Rosa the train ran at full speed, and across the barren New Mexico plain. Air Line Will never quitted his position at the cab window.

Smaller stations were passed in a twinkling, and the young engineer felt just in the mood for fast driving. It seemed as if the train could not go fast enough. Indeed, to him it went at a snail-like pace.

On and on, faster and faster, flew the express to suit the excited fancy of Air Line Will, until at length the Deep Gap itself loomed up ahead. Then Will shut off steam and lowered the gauge until a comfortable thirty-mile clip was the average.

This was a wise precaution as after events proved. The scene of the former conflict with the train robbers was seen, and passed, and now all at once a thrilling sight was spread before Air Line Will's gaze.

Quick as a flash he jammed down the lever and whistled "brakes down." He was not a moment too soon, for this had scarcely been accomplished when the train was brought to a halt at a spot where the iron rails ceased.

To have gone further must have been over a twenty foot embankment. As far as the eye could reach up the grade, iron rails and sleepers had been ripped up and were piled in the ditch.

Not a human being was in sight though, and overwhelmed with amazement and curiosity all on board the train alighted and went forward to view the wreck.

As far as the eye could reach literally the rails were torn up. It looked as if somebody intended that the Santa Rosa road should do no more business, at least for a while.

"Blessed Mary preserve us!" exclaimed the Mexican stoker in blank wonderment. "What is all this, Senor Will? It looks as if we would not make Lopez to-day."

Air Line Will set his lips firmly. He understood the whole thing very well. He knew that it was Black Waldo's design to annihilate the railroad if he could.

"Mind the throttle till I return, Ignaccio," he said to the Mexican stoker.

Then he leaped down from the cab and went forward. He had seen a white paper on a post in the roadbed, and approaching this he saw writing upon it and read:

"FAIR WARNING.

"To Mr. Vandermeer and the stockholders of this railroad. This is fair warning to pack up your duds and get out of Santa Rosa. We don't want no railroad here, nor we ain't

going to have it, so if you're sensible, you'll get out without being kicked out. There's a coffin for every man that stays.

"(Per order)

Black Waldo."

Will read this very comprehensive epistle, and it had a curious effect upon him. His eyes flashed like bright stars, and he gave the post a kick, toppling it over.

Then he turned to the twelve armed men who had come out of the car.

"Boys," he cried, resolutely. "You see what has been done. You can understand it all readily enough. This is no time for fear and no man must think of flinching. Here is work for us. This train must go down to Lopez if we have to lay every rail ourselves and hang Black Waldo at the other end."

"Hurrah!" shouted all, catching the inspiration. "We are with you every time, Will."

But a question now arose. The rails could be quickly relaid and spiked, but they had no tools to work with. But the young engineer was not one easily baffled.

In the cab of the locomotive he carried a telegraphic call instrument. This he spliced to the wire and sent a message back to Santa Rosa.

"Send a construction train up at once. Rails all up and track must be laid. Send two hundred men with tools."

The message was answered, and now all that could be done was to await the construction train.

Mr. Vandermeer, who had received the message, immediately raised a laboring gang and organized a construction train. In exactly forty-five minutes after this train glided out of the Santa Rosa depot.

There was war in the blast, and those who went on the construction gang were provided with arms in case of an attack. It was a critical time.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BATTLE AT DEEP CREEK.

Meanwhile those in the Gap awaited the coming of the construction gang with the deepest interest and impatience. Air Line Will was the most composed of any.

A few tools had been found in one of the car bunkers, and a limited number of men were engaged in relaying the rails.

They had succeeded in laying some dozen rails and spiking them down, when a shrill whistle rang through the Gap, and the construction train appeared.

Wild cheers burst forth at this, and in a few moments the two hundred men with their tools were busily at work.

It may be very readily understood that such an organized force could lay the rails very rapidly, having merely to put them back into their former places and drive new spikes.

But little shoveling had to be done, and in this manner they worked three miles up to the top of the grade very quickly.

Now, however, a new phase in the situation presented itself. The grade beyond was now brought in view, and a great volume of smoke and flame in that direction puzzled Will for a few moments. Then a great cry escaped his lips.

"My soul!" he cried. "Our work is all in vain. That is the Forty Rod Bridge over Deep Creek, and we can go no further until that bridge is repaired."

Here was disaster of the most disheartening kind. It seemed useless to proceed further with the rebuilding of the track until the work of destruction was stopped.

"There is only one way," declared Air Line Will, who was directing operations. "We must push ahead and stop those villains in their work. Every man of them must swing."

"That is right," cried a score of voices. "You lead the way, Will, and we will follow."

Air Line Will looked at the little army of men back of him, and felt that he could lead them if need be over the ramparts of Sebastopol. He cried with inspiration:

"Follow me, then! We will capture Black Waldo, or die in the attempt. Forward all!"

With a wild cheer the little army plunged forward. Down the desolated course of the railway they proceeded, marching with revolvers and rifles ready for use until the Forty Rod Bridge was reached.

It did not seem an easy matter to cross here. The timbers had burned and fallen into the stream, and the current was too swift and forceful to ford easily.

But it was likely that some means of effecting a crossing would have been found had it not been for another incident freshly added to this most thrilling chapter of casualties.

The sudden distant sound of pistol shots was heard, and all were astounded upon looking back to see that those left in charge of the train were hastily retreating down the track before a steady fire from a gang of armed outlaws who had emerged from the fastnesses of the gorge. It was a clever flanking trick of that prince of strategists, Black Waldo.

Will Wright saw the catastrophe with dismay. Both trains were at the disposal of the train robbers.

"Back to the train!" cried Air Line Will. "Forward, all!"

With wild cheers they followed the young engineer. But it was a good ways to cover on foot, and long before they accomplished it all the cars had been fired by the outlaws, and were in a fair way to destruction.

Great volumes of flame and smoke filled the air, and the villains, yelling like demons, danced around the burning pile. Here was a most desperate situation. Without means of getting home otherwise than on foot, for the robbers had taken the precaution this time to cut the telegraph wires, with the enemy in front and well armed, the outlook was most squally.

Yet the young engineer was much encouraged in the fact that he had a large force of men at his back, nearly double the number of Black Waldo's gang.

It was Air Line Will's sudden hope that they might give open battle and defeat them. If this could be accomplished a stop would be put to all further disasters of the kind.

But there was a strong probability that Waldo would pursue his old tactics, which consisted of standing strictly on the defensive. In this case they might be able to hold out an indefinite length of time in the hills.

But the young engineer set his lips firmly and muttered:

"It shall be a decisive battle. Victory or defeat, and I hope the former."

By the time they had reached the burning cars the outlaws had retired to the cover of the hillside, from which they kept up a desultory fire upon the construction gang.

It was quite useless to attempt the saving of the cars for the means was not at hand. All that could be done was to watch them burn or turn attention to the wretches who had effected the destruction of all this valuable property.

That they merited the most condign of punishment was certain, and not a man in the construction gang but what was ready to follow their young leader into the jaws of death.

To charge boldly up the hillside, however, would have been the height of folly. With the skill and strategy of a general Will deployed his men to the right and left, and

under the cover of a skirmish line endeavored to outflank his opponents.

In order to do this it was necessary to go around the hill and silently advance through a chaparral growth. This was slow, tedious work, but the move proved a success.

The outlaws were taken completely by surprise, and a most desperate fight, almost hand to hand, ensued.

Twelve of their number were left dead on the spot before they were able to cover a retreat and gain the protection of a grove of pecan trees higher up.

Here they made a stubborn stand, and a number of men were killed on both sides.

But it had now become quite evident that the railroad men were too much for the outlaws, and they fell back sullenly and slowly into the deeper fastnesses of the hills.

In vain Will tried to surround them and force a surrender. The nature of the country would not permit this.

Nightfall came and the young commander ordered a camp upon the spot, and picket lines were established exactly in the case of two hostile armies facing each other, head to head.

"We will never turn back," the young engineer had said decisively. "Not until we have captured the curse of this region."

The night was cloudy and dark. Not a sign of aggressiveness was manifested by the outlaws until daybreak came. Then a great surprise was accorded the railroad men.

The campfires of the outlaws were still burning, but Black Waldo and his men were not to be found. They had quietly beat a retreat under cover of the darkness.

Their trail was followed a short distance, when it was lost.

Air Line Will was greatly disappointed and intensely chagrined. Yet he would not abandon the field. Scouts were sent out and the hills scoured, but not a trace of the foe could be found.

Their place of hiding was such that no ordinary search would reveal. All that day the quest was kept up, then for lack of provisions the pursuers were obliged to fall back to the railroad track. With victory in their grasp the foe had eluded them.

A weary march homeward, or at least to some point where food could be procured, was begun. Yet there was no grumbling, only the keenest of disappointment.

In the foremost ranks Will Wright walked along, with head bowed down and deep in thought. Suddenly every man in the throng came to a halt. There was a cheery locomotive whistle from far up the track toward home, and next moment a relief train hove in view.

Mr. Vandermeer, vainly endeavoring to get tidings from the construction gang, had come down himself in a special. He was the first to leap from the train with a death-like pallor upon his face. He came straight up to Will, and said, in tones of deepest suffering and despair:

"Oh, God! Will, I have lost her. She is gone!"

"What!" cried Air Line Will, with a sudden comprehensive wave of horror. "Do you mean Katie?"

"Heaven help us, yes! She has been abducted. I have every reason to believe by that villain Chauncey Hill."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ABDUCTION.

Success had smiled upon Chauncey Hill's precarious plans in every respect. Upon his return to Santa Rosa that night after his interview with his father he had effected a clever disguise which he felt

That next day he accomplished little, but he laid the wires for a daring plan of operation.

That night news had come from Deep Gap that a fight was in progress between the railroad men and the outlaws.

The entire town had turned out in the most intense of excitement. News was awaited in vain at the telegraph office.

Mr. Vandermeer would not leave his post, and paced his office floor praying every moment to receive news of the capture of Black Waldo.

"I will risk Will Wright," he declared with conviction. "If anybody has the stamina to capture that rascal he has. I will wager that he will win."

No better time could have been chosen by Chauncey Hill for his scheme. He laid the wires cleverly.

It was about nine o'clock that night when a team drove up to the door of the Vandermeer mansion and a man with face muffled alighted.

He held in his hand a note superscribed in an irregular hand to Katie Vandermeer.

Mr. Vandermeer was not at home, and Katie with wildly beating heart opened it hastily and read:

"Miss Katie.—I am badly hurt, and would like to have you come to me. I need assistance, and I know you will not refuse. This man will bring you to me. Come quickly.

"Yours hastily,
"Will Wright."

At an ordinary time this note might have had a vastly different effect upon Katie as it was a little obscure in its details.

But she knew that Will was one of a party fighting the outlaws, and it looked reasonable that he should send for her.

"He thinks I can nurse him better than papa could!" she exclaimed. "I cannot refuse. Of course I will go. How far is it, sir?"

"Not a very great ways," replied the bearer of the message. "You will soon reach the place."

Without consulting anybody in her great haste, and never once suspecting anything wrong, Katie hastily donned wraps and entered the carriage.

She was driven out of the grounds and through the streets of the town, until finally they came out upon the barren plain.

Not until this very moment had Katie felt the slightest touch of suspicion, then she began to ply her driver with questions.

"Am I hurt?" she asked.

"Quite badly hurt," was the reply.

"Is there any danger of its proving fatal?"

"It may be possible."

"Was—was he shot?"

"Yes, miss."

"How much further will we have to go?"

"Not but a few miles."

"I hope we will soon get there."

"I think we will," said Chauncey Hill, dropping into his natural tone of voice, and throwing aside a false beard.

"At least, Miss Katie, you will not go back to your home in your present capacity. You are mine now, forever."

An earthquake at that moment could not have given the young girl a greater shock. An awful wave of horror came over her, a great cry escaped her lips.

"Chauncey Hill!" she shrieked.

He gave one arm about her, and attempted to draw her to him. But she fought him madly, and attempted to leap from the carriage. The horror of an awful despair was

upon her soul. It seemed as if she must suffocate if forced to remain longer in that carriage with her hated captor.

But Hill held her with the grip of a fiend, and she could not escape. At length, overcome with futile struggling, she lay back in the carriage, white and helpless in insensibility.

The villain gazed into her white lovely face with a thrill of fiendish triumph.

"Mine—all mine!" he exclaimed. "Nothing shall take her from me."

He urged the horse on at a faster gait. Very soon the carriage road came to a sudden termination, and became merely a horse trail through the wild waste of country.

To the right was a dense chaparral, and as Chauncey drew up the horse he gave a sharp whistle. A second later half a dozen armed horsemen came out of the thick growth and cantered toward him.

"Buenos, Senor Chauncey!" said the leader, a swarthy Mexican. "You are right on time."

In the gloom the abductor could not see the others' features, but he recognized the voice and replied:

"Ah, Pedro, it is you. Now we must lose no time."

"You have the fair senorita?"

"She is here."

"Caspita! she is beautiful."

The Mexican gazed into the unconscious young girl's face in a devouring way. It angered Chauncey greatly.

"Have you my horse?" he asked, testily, taking the unconscious young girl up in his arms.

"Si, senor," replied Pedro, with alacrity. "Come this way."

A high-mettled horse was led forward and Chauncey mounting it took the form of Katie in his arms, across the animal's shoulders. A man was deputed to take the carriage back to town, and then the abductor with the others following him struck out through the hills.

On they rode rapidly for some ways through narrow passes and deep gorges, until at length by the way which Chauncey had followed once before they entered the robbers' stronghold.

As they did so a long file of men on foot also joined them. A tall, muscular form at their head approached Chauncey and said:

"You were successful?"

"Yes, father," replied the young villain. "I have the prize."

Katie lay unconscious in his arms, and as Chauncey dismounted Black Waldo gazed into her face.

"Perdido!" he exclaimed. "She is pretty as a flower. I don't blame you, my boy, for your love. May you be happy."

"But you," asked Chauncey, "where have you been?"

Black Waldo's brow clouded.

"I want you to go south to-morrow," he said, "and raise me a hundred trusty men. You know how to pick them. I have had a battle to-day with those railroad men, and we have quit about even. But I mean to win. Before another week Santa Rosa and its railroad shall be a thing of the past. I swear it."

"But can you go so far?" asked Chauncey, in amazement. "Will not the governor interfere with troops?"

"He dare not," declared the outlaw chief, with flashing eyes. "There are not organized soldiers enough in New Mexico to defeat me. At least not before I can wipe Santa Rosa out of existence."

Chauncey was stupefied with this announcement of his father's intention. For a moment he could not speak.

"They shall feel the vengeance of Black Waldo," declared the bloodthirsty wretch, savagely. "They shall understand that I am king of these hills. But take care of your pretty prize, and then come to me in my quarters. I want to talk with you."

Chauncey mechanically obeyed. It could not be said that he actually approved of his father's course, yet he did not dare to say anything in disapproval.

One of the outlaw's wives took Katie in charge and administered restoratives, while Chauncey hastened to his father's cabin. Black Waldo was seated at a table upon which were spread papers and plans.

"I have the whole scheme mapped out," he declared, as Chauncey entered. "Santa Rosa shall be destroyed. Risk? Why, all the troops in the United States could hardly ferret me out in these hills, and in my case a way of retreat into Mexico is offered me, where I could defy them all."

Chauncey's narrow brain swam with this stupendous plan, yet he could see that it promised revenge upon those in the little Western town whom he hated, and this one idea was quite enough for his limited intellect to embrace.

He sat down by his father's side, and assisted him to the best of his ability in the plan of destruction and revenge which Black Waldo meditated upon Mr. Vandermeer and his newly-founded beautiful city of Santa Rosa.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FEARFUL SHOCK.

Mr. Vandermeer's announcement of Katie's abduction was a terrific shock to Will Wright, the young engineer. He felt giddy and faint for a moment.

It seemed as if all the light and joy of his life had gone out. In the power of the unscrupulous Hills, father and son, Will could foresee nothing but the most frightful of fates for the girl he loved.

He led the railroad magnate to a seat on a pile of ties, and Mr. Vandermeer, in a broken-hearted way, then narrated how he had become positively assured of Katie's abduction.

Will listened until he had finished, and then he took Mr. Vandermeer's hand, and said:

"What shall we do, Mr. Vandermeer?"

"Indeed, I am at my wit's ends," declared the magnate, in a sobbing voice. "But if harm has come to her——"

Will Wright sprang up, and there was a light in his eyes which was not good to see.

"If harm has come to her!" he cried, raising his right hand, "I solemnly swear it, by all that is righteous, Chauncey Hill and his rascally gang shall be made to suffer! This country is not so broad, my life will not be so short, but that I will avenge her!"

Mr. Vandermeer wrung the young engineer's hand silently, and they went back to the train.

A short while later, after a quick run, the party reached Santa Rosa.

News had been awaited by the citizens of the town, and the great depot was thronged. As Air Line Will alighted from the train he was literally besieged by inquiring people.

When the full particulars were spread broadcast, the most intense of excitement was created. Public opinion was high, and an army of volunteers could have been then and there organized to do battle to the outlaws.

Among the more timid there was a positive reign of terror, for Black Waldo was known to be well armed, and at the head of a large gang of reckless men, while Santa Rosa might be at the mercy of such a lawless set.

It would have been Air Line Will's tactics to at once raise an army, and set out again in quest of the villains, this time better prepared to cope with them.

But the dread knowledge that Katie was a prisoner among

them influenced him to defer this decisive move until he could effect her rescue, which he felt sure could only be accomplished by strategy.

Two days passed, during which the young engineer in vain endeavored to get some tangible sort of clew as to the place of confinement of Katie Vandermeer. The third day he hit quite accidentally upon a new trail.

By the merest chance in the world he met his father upon the street. Mr. Wright was in a close disguise, but this did not prevent Will's recognizing him.

They embraced warmly, and Will exclaimed in surprise: "I thought you had gone back to England, father?"

"No," replied Mr. Wright. "I have decided not to do that. I have learned by cablegram that Blind Bill has been released from prison and is on his way hither. When he arrives I hope to be able to bring Waldo Hill to terms."

"You don't mean it?" cried Will eagerly. "That is the best of luck."

"I hope so, too. But this is a rare streak of fortune in meeting you just now, Will. I have news for you."

"For me!" exclaimed the young engineer, eagerly.

"Yes."

"What may it be?"

"I think I can aid you in finding the young lady who was abducted, Mr. Vandermeer's beautiful daughter."

Will gave a gasping cry of joy.

"Oh, father, you don't mean it?" he cried wildly. "Do not trifle with me."

"I mean every word I say," said Mr. Wright, steadily. "If you can leave your duties long enough to do so, come with me and we will try to make a master stroke. You know I was once in the robbers' stronghold. Is not that sufficient?"

"Go with you?" cried Will. "Yes, this very moment, and to the ends of the earth so long as it is to rescue Katie Vandermeer. But tell me, how did you get your clew, father?"

"Well, I will tell you," replied Mr. Wright, readily. "For a long time I have hovered about the Deep Gap Hills, endeavoring to gain an interview with Waldo. I was successful once. Since then I have made the acquaintance of one of the gang, a Spaniard named Pedro Gomez. By bribing him I have learned many important things."

"Good!" cried Will, excitedly. "And this Spaniard——"

"I can find him at any time. It is through him that I think we can learn the exact whereabouts of Katie and rescue her."

"Hurrah! you have gained what I have been taxing brains and energy for long hours to accomplish. Oh, father, we cannot go too soon."

"We will set out this very moment. But it will be necessary to have horses."

"That will be easy," replied the young engineer. "Come with me."

They proceeded to a neighboring stable, where horses were procured. Mounting them, they rode out of the little New Mexico city, proceeding to the westward.

After some hours of hard riding they finally entered the hills. Mr. Wright led the way through narrow defiles and lofty passes, over rough, rock-strewn ground, where it was slow and tedious work to pick their way.

Suddenly, upon a little rise of ground, Mr. Wright drew up his horse, and pointing to a jutting spur of the mountain, said:

"Beyond that ridge is the stronghold of Black Waldo. We are on dangerous ground now, and must proceed with caution. I think it will be safer to leave our horses here and go forward on foot."

Will slid down from his horse's back with this, and galloped hobbled the animal. Mr. Wright did the same.

A little glade near furnished succulent grass, and the horses were allowed their liberty in it. Then the two adventurers pushed forward on foot.

At length, after a tedious climb over rocks and through dangerous passes, Mr. Wright suddenly came to a halt.

He produced a small whistle, and blew a shrill blast upon it.

An answer came back quickly from a point further up the gorge. Again Mr. Wright whistled, and then footsteps were heard upon the ledges, and a man came in sight.

He was a swarthy Mexican, fancifully dressed, as was the custom of his nation. He gave a start at sight of Will.

"It is all right, Pedro," cried Mr. Wright. "He is my friend, and can be trusted. Come right along."

"Caspita!" exclaimed the fellow, warily. "Nobody can be trusted nowadays, señor, unless it be one's own kin."

"Well, he is my own kin," said Mr. Wright. "He is my son."

The Mexican's manner changed.

His look of distrust was supplanted by a well simulated one of pleasure, and he advanced, extending his hand to Will. The young engineer was obliged to accept it, though he instinctively disliked the fellow.

"Pedro greets you, señor. You are welcome," said the Spaniard, affably.

"The same," replied Will, stiffly. Then Gomez turned to Mr. Wright.

"You are on time, señor. How can Pedro serve you to-day?"

"Is your captain at home?" asked Mr. Wright.

"Si, señor," replied the fellow. "Do you wish to interview him?"

"No," replied Mr. Wright, shrugging his shoulders. "Life is yet dear to me. If Waldo could get me in his clutches it would be my last day on earth. It is not that, Pedro, but I want to ask you about the young lady, Miss Vandermeer?"

The Mexican gave a start.

"The fair senorita, daughter of the railroad owner?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Mr. Wright, while Will leaned forward eagerly. The reply was so sudden and so totally unexpected that its effect was something terrible upon Air Line Will.

"The fair senorita," said the Mexican slowly, "I regret to say, is no more. She is dead."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DARK DEED.

Pedro Gomez's declaration was rendered in an ordinary tone, but to Will Wright it was a shock which no words can express. It was like a lightning flash before his eyes, and left him stupefied, spellbound with awful horror.

"Dead!"

The word dropped from his lips.

Then a mighty wave of emotion seemed to surge over him.

He sprang forward and clutched the Mexican's arm almost fiercely as he cried tensely:

"Do you mean every word of that?"

Gomez affected amazement, but made reply steadily:

"Si, señor. It is the truth."

"She is dead?"

"Yes."

Will's voice was awfully hollow and strange as he went on.

"How can you prove that to me?"

The Mexican seemed to hesitate.

"I can prove it," he said.

"How?"

"I can take you to her grave."

"Her grave?"

With a gasping cry Will Wright recoiled. He trembled, staggered, and groped about him like one blind. It was some moments before he recovered himself.

"Tell me," he said, almost fiercely. "How did she die? Was it violence?"

"No," replied Gomez, guardedly. "We found her dead in her room in the cave. There were no marks upon her nor nothing to indicate suicide. It is a mystery. Young Will felt bad, and wept at her grave."

Air Line Will raised both hands heavenward, and made a mute vow.

"Her heart was broken," he said, hoarsely, then he seemed to grow calmer, and continued:

"I will go with you to her grave."

Mr. Wright all this while had remained silent. Gomez hesitated.

"It is dangerous," he said. "The grave is right in sight of our village."

"Dangerous!" cried Will, scornfully. "What do I care for danger? Lead the way, and I will follow if it is into the enemy's midst."

Gomez exchanged glances with Mr. Wright, who said, in an undertone:

"Can it be done?"

"Yes," said Gomez, slowly. "We may succeed."

"Well, lead the way."

Without a word further the Mexican turned and led the way around the mountain wall. It was necessary to proceed with the greatest of caution, for they were right in the midst of the foe's stronghold.

Very soon they came into a little wooded dell. Here in the moss-grown earth was a mound of freshly turned earth, with a board set up for a headstone.

Air Line Will went forward and read the inscription upon it. As he did so his noble young heart was rent asunder. This was the inscription upon the board:

"Here lies the mortal remains of Katie Vandermeer, found dead in her room."

This was all.

No mention of her tender age or aught else of fitting sort was there. Air Line Will stood for some moments over the grave and his frame trembled like a reed, while tears coursed down his handsome pallid cheeks.

Presently he turned, however, and said in a cold, hard voice:

"Come, let us go."

He strode away from the spot and soon they had reached the defile again. Mr. Wright pressed a package of money into Pedro's hand and said:

"Watch and wait. I shall want you again, perhaps very soon."

"Si, señor," replied the Mexican, with a low bow, as he turned and vanished around the mountain side.

Then the father turned and threw an arm about his son. He wept with him in gentlest sympathy, until Will was constrained to turn and say:

"Father, I loved that girl. She was my life, my guiding star. I shall never love again. But I must not chide God for taking her from me. Life is not yet deprived of its charm, for I have my father left to me yet. Therefore, I will thank Him for his mercy."

"That is right, my noble boy," cried the father, with all his

soul. "I cannot but believe that happiness unalloyed will yet be ours. At least, we have each other."

"Until death do us part," rejoined Will, warmly. "Oh, I cannot bear to think of that."

"It is not well to think much upon those things," replied Mr. Wright. "Have good cheer, my son."

Somewhat comforted, yet in great agony of spirit, Will turned and walked down the defile.

It was his duty to return to Santa Rosa and apprise Mr. Vandermeer of his beloved daughter's fate. Will would have avoided that task, but he knew that he could not.

He could picture the awful anguish of the distracted father.

"It will kill him," he muttered. "He will never stand the shock."

They had proceeded some distance and had come to a turn in the defile, when a thrilling incident occurred.

Suddenly there arose before them, right from the ground, three masked men with gleaming pistols aimed at them.

"Hands up!" cried a ringing voice.

Under ordinary circumstances Air Line Will would have recognized this as the wisest thing to do.

The men were undoubtedly of Black Waldo's gang, merciless cut-throats who would not scruple to shoot them down. They had the advantage also in having first aim.

But the engineer was in a mad, reckless mood, and not the fear of death was strong enough to restrain him in the daring move which he made.

He was near an angle in the canyon wall, and upon the impulse of the moment he stepped quickly behind it, drawing his revolver at the same moment. The chances were ten to one in favor of the outlaws.

Crack—ack!

Three reports blended almost in one. A bullet cut its way through Will's sleeve, but did him no harm. Mr. Wright, however, had sank down in a heap upon the ground. This aroused all the tiger in the young engineer's heart.

Knowing that the villains' weapons were empty, on the instant, before they could even re-cock their pistols, he stepped out, and quick as a flash fired two shots.

Both were effective, and two of the outlaws fell, while the third, being without cover, beat a hasty retreat.

Will did not heed him or the men he had shot, but sprang to his father's side. Mr. Wright was getting upon his feet, however, somewhat dazed and bewildered.

"Are you badly hurt, father?" cried Will.

"No, I think not," replied Mr. Wright, in a faint voice. "I think there is a ball in my side, though."

Will hastily made an examination, and found that one of the bullets had indeed lodged in Mr. Wright's side, in the fleshy part. It was not a serious, though a painful wound. What was to be done?

Will was never at a loss in an emergency of this kind, so he lifted the wound man upon his back and carried him to the glade where they had left the horses. Mr. Wright was able to ride, and mounting, they galloped back to Santa Rosa. A doctor was called, and removed the ball.

Seeing his father carefully provided for, Will did not neglect his duty, but went at once to Mr. Vandermeer's house to apprise him of the sad fate of Katie. Applying at the door of the mansion, one of the servants directed Will to a summerhouse where Mr. Vandermeer was resting.

Will approached the summerhouse with wildly beating heart. He was sick and giddy, but summoning all his strength kept on. He crossed the threshold, and at that instant one of the most awful sights which he had ever witnessed was before him.

From the floor of the summerhouse lay the prostrate form

of Mr. Vandermeer, but his face was drawn and ashen gray, and a wound in his breast told the awful truth.

"Oh, my God!" the cry pealed from Will's lips, "Mr. Vandermeer is dead. It is murder."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CRACKSMAN.

Petrified with horror and wholly unable to move after the awful cry pealed from his lips, Air Line Will stood gazing down upon the corpse of his employer.

Coming so swiftly upon that other horror, the news of Katie's death, it seemed to Will as if the whole world had changed; life had lost its former roseate hue of hope and joy. Utter desolation and misery had succeeded.

"Oh, my God! this is awful," he moaned, with white, anguished lips as he sank down beside his dead employer. "Who has done it? Oh who could do such an awful thing as this?"

It was a cry which welled from his soul. No answer was at hand. All was a blank dread mystery. Only the all-seeing eye of God knew the truth.

In vain Will looked for life in the body.

There was no disputing the fact, Mr. Vandermeer was dead.

Will had just arisen to his feet when a stifled cry at his shoulder attracted his attention. He turned quickly to face one of the servants.

The fellow's face mirrored the horror of his soul as he also comprehended that his master was dead.

"How did this happen?" asked Will, in a quick, sharp voice, clutching the fellow's wrists. "Can you tell about it?"

"No!" almost shrieked the terrified man. "Oh, this is awful! A man came here an hour ago to see Mr. Vandermeer, and——"

"And what?" asked Will, almost fiercely, as the fellow hesitated.

"They came here to the summerhouse. I heard them talking loudly, but did not see the man go away."

"What sort of a looking man was he?" asked Will, all afire with impatience. "Of course he was the murderer."

The man described him slowly, and with an exertion of memory. A startled cry broke from Will Wright.

"That was Waldo Hill!" he cried in an agonized way. "Oh, when will this villainous work cease? It cannot be that the wicked will prosper always."

He left the summerhouse and at once proceeded to give the alarm. The coroner was sent for, and soon arrived. The fearful news created almost an uproar in Santa Rosa. It seemed as if the whole town was on the spot in an incredible short space of time.

Mr. Vandermeer's body was removed after a brief inquest to the house, and prepared for burial. There were no relatives present, for Mr. Vandermeer and his daughter had been the sole members of the family.

Will Wright was obliged to attend to most of the arrangements of the funeral, assisted by the officers of the road and the city officials, and Mr. Vandermeer's body was placed in the tomb.

An immense concourse of people were assembled at the funeral, and a heavy pall fell over the once happy and smiling little western city.

No man's heart but was sad and sorrowful that day. The kind benefactor, the founder of the town, and the chief support of Santa Rosa was gone. It was a terrible blow, and the people mourned as one who had been in their midst.

Air Line Will bore up bravely until after the funeral and then for a time he gave way to his pent-up emotion. But that evening a vast crowd besieged the young engineer's house. An indignation meeting it was, and the foremost ones cried:

"We want a leader. We will not rest until Black Waldo has paid the penalty of his crimes. Santa Rosa is in arms against this monster. We want a leader."

It was the first time in life that Will Wright had made a speech. Mustering courage he stepped out and addressed them. In the past few weeks the executive ability and judgment of the young engineer had won for him popularity and respect, as well as given him a mighty influence over the people.

The people listened attentively to his words, which counseled moderation and concerted action. A crisis was at hand, and it was certain that Black Waldo and his gang must be wiped out of existence.

Then Will called for a hundred armed volunteers to report at the public square at an early hour the next morning. Wild cheers were given by the crowd, and they dispersed to make preparations for the morrow's excursion.

Will had retired to his chamber worn out and exhausted from the effects of his past week's experience. But he could not sleep. Indeed, he did not remove his clothes, and a sudden rap on his door called him to his feet.

"Come in!" he said.

The door opened and Will sprang up with a cry. A man came in and Will at once embraced him with a flood of tears.

"My father," he cried, "you are all I have left in the world now. Life would seem a blank but for you."

"My own son," replied Mr. Wright in deepest tones of affection, "we can live for each other. I feel for you deeply."

"And you have recovered from your wound?" asked Will, solicitously.

"Quite so," replied Mr. Wright. "More than that, I have good news for you."

"For me?" asked Will.

"Yes, for both of us."

"What could be good news to me now?" asked the young engineer, sorrowfully.

"Well, to know that it will be possible to visit vengeance upon Black Waldo. Would you not esteem it so?"

"Yes," replied Will, truthfully. "I must candidly say that I should regard that knowledge as joyful news."

"Then I can give you joy. The hour of retribution is at hand. Bill Hogan by his rightful name, commonly called Blind Bill, the English cracksman, has come to Santa Rosa, and is at this moment outside the door. Shall I ask him

Will gave a start.

"By all means," he replied, eagerly.

Mr. Wright threw open the door and made a gesture. A man of short stature and of a forbidding cast of features came in. It required but a glance to identify him as a crook.

He bowed awkwardly before the young engineer as Mr. Wright introduced him. A few commonplace remarks were exchanged, and then an evil gleam shot into the rascal's eyes, as he said:

"I owes up to being a 'ard one, an' there is not much chance to reform me, but my hold pal, Waldo Hill, 'as went back hon me, an' may Hi never draw hanother breath hif I don't square accounts with 'im."

"So that is the object of your visit to Santa Rosa?" asked Will.

"No, not exactly," replied the crook. "This here gentleman has been overkind to me, han' Hi mean to play 'im a fair game. Bill his a bad one, but 'e never forgets a favor. Hi'll

fix the blooming rogue hif he don't set the gentleman hall right. 'E won't dare to refuse me."

An ugly smile played about the fellow's coarse features. Will felt very uncomfortable in his presence.

"What is your first move?" he asked.

Blind Bill's eyes opened very wide.

"Hi'll send up me cards to Mr. Waldo Hill," he replied, ironically. "'E won't dare refuse me, ye can depend hon hit. Oh, I'll do the gentleman a fair turn for 'is kindness. 'E could have seen me transported, an' Blind Bill never fergits a good turn."

The crook bowed and turned to leave. Will was not over-anxious to remain longer in the company of such an uncongenial personage. Mr. Wright turned and gripped Will's hand.

"This fellow will endeavor to obtain from Hill the evidence to vindicate my honor," he said. "That will be a happy day for me. You cannot blame me for enlisting his services."

"No," cried Will, warmly. "I hope he will succeed. I have faith that victory will crown our next efforts."

The words were scarcely out of Will's mouth when an exclamation escaped the lips of Blind Bill, and he sprang to the window.

"Egad!" he cried, excitedly. "I'm a blooming idiot hor the whole city his afire."

"The city on fire!" cried Will, with an awful thrill of horror.

All sprang to the window, and a sight was revealed which imbued their spirits with a strange species of terror and dismay.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TRACK OF THE DESTROYER.

To the eastward relieving the blackness of the midnight sky was the red glare of a conflagration. A few points to the westward was a similar light. To the northward was an extensive blaze, and directly in the heart of the city was yet another.

This was more than coincidence. It was clear evidence of incendiarism and Will Wright now understood the savage warning of Black Waldo, that he would destroy the city of Santa Rosa.

It aroused all the lion in the young engineer's spirit. He threw off his coat and started for the door, crying:

"The crisis has come. Now it is war to the knife. Santa Rosa must be saved."

The fire-bells were clanging and a great roar was coming up from the streets below.

A maddening whirl of excitement, terror and uncertainty was the result. People were hurried from their beds at the dread hour to find the torch of the destroyer hanging over them.

A fiend was abroad. No sooner had a fire started in one locality than another sprang to life in some other direction.

The beautiful little city was doomed. It was a sight pitiable to witness. Driven back before the advancing flames were great bodies of men, women, and children, who saw their all swept from them in the most pitiless manner.

The magnificent new business block of which Santa Rosa boasted, the beautiful residences, and even the costly depot all succumbed, and by daylight scarcely a hundred dwellings scattered in the outskirts of the city were left standing.

The terrible work of the incendiary had been thorough and lamentable. Only a black, charred, smoldering heap of ruins was all that was left of Santa Rosa.

Strong men wept at the scene of desolation, women were

heart-broken and a heavy pall of gloom hung over the little community. Those driven from their homes were obliged to camp in the outskirts of the city in rude huts made of the boughs of trees.

Worse than all else was the knowledge that Mr. Vandermeer, whose capital and energy might even in this contingency have soon rebuilt the town, was dead. It seemed as if Black Waldo would see the literal fulfillment of his prediction. But while this work of destruction had been going on Air Line Will had not been idle. To the contrary, he had experienced a number of most thrilling adventures.

His first move was to seek the organization of a determined body of men to check the progress of the flames. But this he found a physical impossibility in view of the tremendous excitement and terror. Throwing aside this effort he next lent his personal endeavors to the succor of those who were trying to escape the flames.

Turning suddenly into a narrow street, he came upon a couple of the incendiaries who were putting the torch to a fine residence. Without an instant's hesitation Will sprang upon them.

The first villain he felled with a well-directed blow of his fist.

The second, however, turned upon him with a savage yell and a knife in his hand. At the same moment in the glare of the torch Will saw his features. A cry of joy escaped him.

"It is you, Chauncey Hill!" he cried with excitement. "This is the best of luck. You shall hang for this, you fiend!"

"Curse you, Will Wright," gritted the young villain, "this is my chance to square accounts with you."

"And squared they shall be," cried Will. "Your villainy is at an end, Chauncey Hill. You are responsible for Katie Vandermeer's death, and I mean to kill you!"

Chauncey Hill laughed scornfully.

He made a stroke at the young engineer with the knife. Will parried the attack and gripped his wrist. With a quick movement he wrenched the knife from him and threw it away. Then the struggle became hand to hand.

There was little doubt as to the result of the struggle had they been left to finish the contest alone. But this was not permitted.

Will was more than a match for Hill, and with a sudden supple turn of his body threw him.

The young villain fell heavily, and for a moment was stunned.

Will held him down firmly, and looked about him in doubt as to what to do with his prisoner.

To look for or expect the aid of an officer at that time was out of the question. It was the young engineer's desire to place the young villain in the power of the law.

But it was a moment when law and order were overruled by anarchy, and the fire fiend. Thus in doubt, Will had scarcely time to half form a plan when a thrilling thing occurred.

From the gloom a man of powerful build rushed forth. In the light of the flames he had recognized Will. It was Waldo Hill, the outlaw chief.

Will saw him coming, and half raised to receive his attack. The fury of most implacable hatred was in the archvillain's eyes as he glared at the young engineer.

"Curse you, let him up!" he gritted. "You have been a stumbling block in our path long enough. Your time has come."

The villain had in his hand a billet of wood, with which he dealt Will a tremendous blow. It struck the young engineer's right arm, and for a moment deprived him of its strength.

"I shall fight to the death, Black Waldo," cried the brave young engineer. "You have been a curse to this region long enough, and if I can rid it of you, I shall do so, even though I reddened my hands with your blood."

A mocking laugh burst from the outlaw's lips. He rushed upon Will savagely, and a fearful struggle followed. At that moment Chauncey regained his feet, and like wolves they rushed upon their victim.

Too late Will realized his foolhardiness in attacking them single-handed. It would have been more prudent to have kept aloof until he could have help.

But, as he was in for it, he fought bravely, and the result might have been different had it not been for his wounded arm.

Suddenly Waldo rushed in upon him, and struck him a powerful blow upon the head. Will fell to the ground helpless. A cry of triumph escaped Chauncey's lips.

"Is he dead?" asked Waldo, breathlessly.

"No, he is alive," replied Chauncey, who had felt of the victim's heart. "But he must die. I have an idea."

"What?"

"He won't revive for some time. Nothing can be more fitting than that we should cremate our enemy upon the ruins of his beloved town. Throw him into the flames!"

A fiendish cry escaped Black Waldo.

"All right," he cried. "Into the flames with him! So may perish all our foes."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN OLD SCORE SETTLED.

It was a most diabolical crime to contemplate, but this fact did not prove a restraint upon the villains. Murder most foul was in their hearts.

Without a moment's hesitation they lifted the light form of the young engineer and bore him to the pile of burning timbers which was all that was left of a fine house.

A quick swing and Will's body was sent hurtling into the flames. It vanished from sight, a great burst of flame went up, and then father and son turning, gripped hands.

After this they mounted their horses and rode away. Father and son parted shortly, and after proceeding a distance Waldo Hill was confronted by Bill Hogan, the convict. After a fierce argument between them, Hill drew a knife and hissed:

"There's only one way to settle it twixt you an' I, Bill, and that is, one of us must go under. Whether it is you or me remains to be seen."

With this the outlaw chief rushed upon his former pal, but now implacable foe. Blind Bill did not retreat, but grappled with him, and a struggle followed which effectually baffles description.

But it was too terrific to last long. Suddenly the cracksman got a grapevine upon his antagonist, then a backlock and threw him heavily to the ground, his head striking a sharp stone.

"That settles it!" gritted Blind Bill as he, with an effort flung Hill's apparently lifeless body from him. "This region is rid of a monster."

He arose to his feet and hurled the knife into the darkness. He did not even look back at his foe's body, but stood there a moment outlined against the night sky.

Fatal move! Waldo Hill was not dead, but mortally wounded. He had yet strength enough left to rise upon his elbow. From an inner pocket he drew forth a small re-

volver. It was an excellent target, and with quick aim he fired.

Blind Bill, without a cry, dropped dead.

* * * * *

We left Will as he was thrown into the murning house.

Will fell into a cistern in the cellar of the house, and, waiting until the fire was out, crawled out and made his way to a place where the people had congregated.

Will made them a spirited address and then all were declared in readiness. Horses were procured with difficulty, for many noble animals perished in the flames.

But at length the entire division was mounted and armed, and, in fact, quite a small army rode out of Santa Rosa an hour later.

A course was set straight for the Deep Gap Hills. There was a deadly determination in every man's breast to root out the outlaws or never come home alive.

Will was riding at their head at a swift gallop when a man suddenly urged his horse into a pace beside him. It was Mr. Wright.

"Where are you?" exclaimed Will, not without pleasure, "I am a little late, but you are here."

"This I all pray for success, my son."

"By day the gang of Black Waldo shall be exterminated," said Will, determinedly. "I am very much in earnest. I feel sure of victory."

"Do you know the exact route to the outlaws' stronghold?" "Nothing beyond my remembrance of the spot where we met Gomez and were led to Katie's grave," replied Will.

"At all events," said Mr. Wright, "I shall go as far with you as there, and I will show you the pass which leads into his den."

The hills soon came in sight and the band of avengers entered them. It was well that Mr. Wright was one of the band, for Will would have experienced no little difficulty in exactly locating the pass. This saved time, and the little band of avengers rode down upon the robbers' stronghold rapidly.

But before they reached the end of the pass by Mr. Wright's advice Will called a halt:

It was decided as the best move to here deploy two lines and surround the camp so that none of the gang might escape.

All of the men were ordered to take to cover and await certain signal for an advance. This arrangement was made, as it was believed that many of the gang, perhaps the Hills themselves, were not yet returned from Santa Rosa.

This proved a wise precaution.

Hidden in ambush in the defile, the watchers saw a dozen of the outlaws return by way of the pass. Others came straggling in, and desiring to make sure of his game, Will did not order an advance.

Instead he went forward alone to reconnoiter. In a few moments he had gained a position from which he could see the outlaws' camp.

What was more important to him than aught else was the lay of the camp, and the best and nearest method of approaching it. This he satisfied himself of, and had turned to retrace his steps when he was accorded a startling surprise.

There was the strange consciousness of the near presence of some persons, whether friend or foe he could not say.

He was not long in doubt, for a smothered laugh in his ear was heard. A man stepped out of the bushes.

It was his own father. Mr. Wright had also been reconnoitering the outlaws' camp.

"Father!" exclaimed Will in surprise. "You gave me a

start. I could not imagine who it was. You, too, are reconnoitering?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Wright. "And would you like to know my opinion?"

"I would," answered Will.

"I think you could have no better time to make a descent upon the camp. To be sure, all the gang are not there, but it will be far easier capturing them for that reason, and then you entrap the others as fast as they come in."

Will was forcibly impressed with this view of the matter. Indeed it was a plan just beginning to formulate in his mind.

"You are right," he cried impulsively. "That is just what we will do. I will go at once back to the line and give the word to advance."

"I will go to the other side of the camp," said Mr. Wright, "and see that your men advance there."

"Please do so!" cried Will, eagerly. "We will be sure of victory."

But Mr. Wright shook his head.

"I don't know," he said, dubiously. "These outlaws are hard fighters."

However, he hastened away upon his errand. Will turned and skirted the base of the height leading into the gorge.

As he did so he suddenly turned a corner of the wall of the defile, and came upon a sight which caused his heart to leap into his mouth. For a moment he would have sworn that he was dreaming.

Advancing with bowed head along the defile with slow tread, and evidently buried in thought, was a young girl. Will knew her, though he could not see her face.

"Just heaven!" he gasped, "what wonderful miracle is this? It is Katie Vandermeer, returned from the dead!"

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE DEFILE.

There was no mistaking the joyous fact that gave Will Wright such an ecstatic thrill.

Like a flash the truth became apparent to him. The rascally Gomez, for some reason or other, had lied to him. The grave which he had been shown was a sham.

It was a clever trick of Chauncey Hill's, he felt sure, though what the villain's purpose could have been, otherwise than the knowledge that his hated young rival would be stabbed to the heart, Will could not imagine.

The meeting of the lovers was most joyful.

He took both her hands and looked into her eyes. At that moment they understood each other, and their loving hearts were welded for life.

But while this discussion had been taking place other matters had formed a crisis. Will had become oblivious of his original purpose in meeting Katie.

"Great heavens! I have forgotten my duty," he cried. "The line must advance. Katie, I must leave you now. No, you must not remain here, come with me."

She accepted his arm, and they were about to start down the defile when Will was accorded an astounding surprise.

From behind rocks about fully a half score of armed men appeared. They were of the outlaw gang, and quickly surrounded the young engineer.

"Hands up!"

There was no alternative but to obey. It would have been madness to have refused. But the young engineer never lost his self-possession.

The young engineer drew from his pocket a whistle and blew a shrill, piercing call.

A reply quickly came.

Indeed, much quicker than Will had anticipated. Mr. Wright had been engaged in drawing the line of attack nearer, and now an almost instant response to Will's whistle the defile was filled with armed men.

Gomez and his followers were instantly made prisoners, and Mr. Wright came forward, saying eagerly:

"There will be no battle at all, Will. Those in the camp will surrender unconditionally I have every reason to believe."

"That is the best of news!" cried Will, with great joy. "Advance at once, and do not let a man escape."

Mr. Wright had turned to see that this request was executed when he received a startling surprise. From a clump of bushes to the right came the feeble, agonized call of a human voice.

He turned and parted the clump of cacti. There, upon the hot sand, with blanched face and parched tongue, was stretched the dying form of one whom both Will Wright and his father recognized with a strange thrill.

It was Waldo Hill, the outlaw.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CLEARED AT LAST.

After a moment he made a gesture, and Mr. Wright drew nearer.

"Jim," said the monster, huskily, "I am going over the river. This is my last call."

"Then upon your death-bed can you set me right before the world? That is to say, are you willing to atone for your misdeeds?"

"Yes," cried the dying villain, eagerly. "Call witnesses and I will confess all. If I do that will you forgive me, Jim?"

"I will freely forgive you."

"Then I can die happier."

A draught of cooling water was given him, which revived him greatly. Then his head was lifted by one of the men, and he made a statement which cleared Mr. Wright from the foul stain which had made of him an exile.

He was buried hastily in the defile, as was also the body of Blind Bill.

An advance was then made upon the outlaw camp. A brief stand was made, but the report becoming circulated that Black Waldo was dead, the outlaws fell into disorder and were easily captured.

But no trace of Chauncey Hill could be found. It was a signal victory for the men of Santa Rosa, and they returned with their prisoners to the city, or at least the spot where it had been.

The reign of terror was over. Waldo Hill and his gang were exterminated, and never again were trains held up or wrecked on the Santa Rosa and Lopez railroad.

Perhaps one of the most active of all was Air Line Will.

Dependence was placed wholly upon him by the officers of the road for its successful rebuilding, and a great surprise was in store for the young engineer.

Will had shown wonderful executive ability, honesty and a knowledge of railroading, which were the prime requisites in the eyes of the directors. Their resolution was unanimous when, some months afterward, they came to the cab of Will's locomotive and calling him down, said:

"Will Wright, we have made up our minds that you are qualified to fill a vastly higher position than of engineer. There is no other person who can quite fill the position we

design for you. We will accept no refusal nor apology. We have unanimously voted you general superintendent of the Santa Rosa and Lopez Railroad, with a salary of five thousand dollars a year. Will you accept?"

"Oh, gentlemen, you cannot mean that. I fear I am not qualified for that position."

"The vote of two-thirds of the stockholders, which two-thirds belongs to Miss Vandermeer, together with the confirmation of all the rest, which makes it unanimous, says that you are qualified. You cannot do better than accept."

The result was that Will accepted the offer, though he left his engine with reluctance.

It was quite a rise in the world for a young man like him, but Will proved himself equal to the occasion, and the able manner in which he took charge of affairs satisfied the directors that they had the right man in the right place.

The Santa Rosa Railroad from that hour became prosperous and mighty. New trains were added, a junction made with a heavy trunk line, emigrants poured into Santa Rosa and opened up the country about.

The advance, dating from the extermination of Waldo's gang, was like magic. Santa Rosa extended its limits, new buildings were erected, and the tide of which poured into the place made the founders rich.

For five years Air Line Will remained superintendent of the Santa Rosa Railroad.

Then a great consolidation was made whereby he became almost the entire owner of the road and also the happiest man in the world.

Katie Vandermeer owned two-thirds of the Santa Rosa stock, so it can be understood how it was when the great wedding came off. That love which had been conceived from first sight had never died out, and it was a happy day when Will Wright led his blushing bride to the altar.

Mr. Wright, now that his reputation was vindicated and he no longer stood in fear of the law, had identified his interests with Santa Rosa, and, entering into honorable speculation in lands, became quite wealthy.

To-day Santa Rosa is at the height of its success. May it rise higher, and happiness crown the life of the boy hero of this story, who has proved to the reader that right will always triumph over might and villainy.

Those men who were in Hill's gang were fitly punished by imprisonment. As for Chauncey Hill, he never showed up in Santa Rosa again, and whether dead or alive, has never returned to that city.

Years have passed since the events we have chronicled occurred. But even to this day, Will Wright retains his love for an exciting ride on the rails, and often when the spirit so moves him, leaps aboard of some locomotive and takes a hundred-mile run, proving that his hand upon the throttle is as steady to-day and his skill as great as upon that thrilling occasion when his bravery won the cognomen of Air Line Will.

THE END.

Read "THE RICHEST BOY IN ARIZONA; OR, THE MYSTERY OF THE GILA," by Howard Austin, which will be the next number (321) of "Pluck and Luck."

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